



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



MONDAY — 10 JAN 2022

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Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	01/10 Greenhouse gas emissions bounce back
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/10/climate/emissions-pandemic-rebound.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — America’s greenhouse gas emissions from energy and industry rose 6.2 percent in 2021 as the economy began recovering from pandemic lows and the nation’s coal plants roared back to life, according to a preliminary estimate published Monday by the Rhodium Group.</p> <p>The rebound was not a total surprise: The nation’s emissions had plummeted more than 10 percent in 2020, the largest one-year drop on record, after the initial coronavirus outbreak triggered widespread lockdowns and energy use plunged to its lowest level in decades. As restrictions eased and economic activity picked back up, emissions were expected to bounce back.</p> <p>“If anything, last year’s rebound in emissions was lower than it could have been because the pandemic is still causing disruptions and the economy isn’t back to normal,” said Kate Larsen, a partner at the Rhodium Group, a research and consulting firm. “Emissions are still well below 2019 levels.”</p> <p>The uptick in emissions underscored the challenges President Biden faces in his quest to shift the nation away from oil, gas and coal and help avert a drastic rise in global temperatures.</p> <p>Mr. Biden has set a goal of slashing the nation’s greenhouse gas emissions at least 50 percent below 2005 levels by 2030, which is roughly the pace that scientists say the whole world must follow to keep the Earth from warming more than 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above preindustrial levels and minimize the risk of catastrophic effects. The planet has already warmed 1.1 degrees Celsius over the past century.</p> <p>But after last year’s rebound, U.S. emissions are now just 17.4 percent below 2005 levels, the Rhodium Group estimated. Several recent studies have found that the United States is likely to fall far short of achieving Mr. Biden’s climate goals without major new policies to speed up the transition to wind, solar and other clean energy.</p> <p>Whether Mr. Biden can enact these policies is a major question: His Build Back Better Act — which contains \$555 billion in spending and tax incentives for renewable power, electric cars and other climate programs — remains in limbo on Capitol Hill. Senator Joe Manchin III of West Virginia, a crucial Democratic swing vote, has so far balked at supporting the legislation, though Democrats are expected to try again this year. Republicans have uniformly opposed the bill.</p> <p>Recent analysis led by researchers at Princeton University found that the bill, if passed in its current form, could potentially get the United States most of the way to its climate goal, by tripling or quadrupling the pace of wind and solar power installations, accelerating electric vehicle sales and spurring utilities to retire more coal plants over the next decade.</p> <p>For now, however, the United States remains deeply dependent on fossil fuels to power its economy.</p>

Transportation, the nation's largest source of greenhouse gases, saw a 10 percent increase in emissions in 2021 after a 15 percent decline in 2020, the Rhodium Group estimated. Much of that rebound was driven by a rise in diesel-fueled trucks carrying goods to consumers as e-commerce surged, with freight traffic climbing above pre-pandemic levels last year.

Passenger travel in cars and airplanes has been slower to recover, as the uncertainty around new variants disrupted travel plans and kept many people at home. Gasoline consumption did not return to 2019 levels until October, while demand for jet fuel remains well below pre-pandemic levels.

There are some signs that vehicles on the roads are starting to shift: Sales of electric cars, a key technology for cutting emissions, increased to record highs in 2021, accounting for [5 percent of all new car sales in the third quarter](#), according to Atlas Public Policy, a research firm. But electric cars are not yet widespread enough to make a major dent in emissions, and few trucks have been electrified to date.

Coal, the most polluting of all fossil fuels, also made a big comeback last year, with emissions from coal-fired power plants rising 17 percent in 2021 after declining 19 percent in 2020. While America is still burning far less coal than it was a decade ago, the fuel is far from dead.

In the years before the pandemic hit, America's electric utilities had been retiring hundreds of coal plants, replacing them with cheaper and cleaner natural gas, wind and solar power. Then, in 2020, electricity use sagged nationwide and many utilities [ran their remaining coal plants far less often](#), since it was often the most expensive fuel.

But that dynamic reversed last year: As natural gas prices nearly doubled in 2021, driven in part by a cold winter and rising exports, many utilities switched back to running their coal plants more often. (On average, burning coal for electricity produces twice as much carbon dioxide as burning natural gas, though natural gas use also creates plenty of methane, a potent greenhouse gas.

"It really illustrates how much we've depended on cheap natural gas prices to keep coal in decline," Ms. Larsen said. "Overall, we still expect coal to decline further in the years ahead, but unless there are new policies put in place to clean up the power sector, the coal industry could see a bit of a lifeline if there are big swings in the gas market."

A [recent report](#) from the U.S. Energy Information Administration projected that coal emissions would likely dip again next year if natural gas prices stabilize. Electric utilities have already announced plans to retire [at least 28 percent of their remaining coal plants](#) by 2035, the agency said. And power companies installed new wind turbines and solar panels at a record pace over the past two years.

Still, meeting Mr. Biden's climate goals will be daunting: To do so, the Rhodium Group has estimated that the United States would need to cut emissions roughly 5 percent each year between now and 2030, which is a much faster pace than the country was achieving before the pandemic. Last month, the solar industry [warned](#) that new installations could slow in 2022 because of supply-chain constraints and rising material costs.

The Rhodium Group also noted that the United States has made scant progress in cutting emissions from two other major sectors: industry and buildings.

Emissions from heavy industry, like cement and steel, rose 3.6 percent in 2021 after declining 6.2 percent in 2020. Such factories, which account for roughly one-fifth of the nation's emissions, could [prove difficult to clean up without new technologies](#), and industrial emissions have stayed largely flat since 2005.

Homes and buildings also directly produce emissions by burning fossil fuels such as natural gas in furnaces, hot water heaters, stoves, ovens and clothes dryers. Building emissions rose 1.9 percent in 2021 after declining 7.6 percent in 2020.

	<p>The Rhodium Group report only looked at emissions from energy and industrial sources and did not look at sectors such as agriculture. It also did not account for any uptick in emissions resulting from last year's wildfires in California, Colorado and the Pacific Northwest, which burned millions of acres of forests and grasslands, sending the carbon dioxide that had been locked away in all those trees into the atmosphere.</p> <p>Using satellite data, the European Union's Copernicus Atmosphere Monitoring Service estimated in December that last year's North American wildfires emitted 83 million tons of carbon dioxide. While the forests that went up in flames may eventually grow back, absorbing carbon dioxide as they do, that process will take years. And scientists have warned that wildfires will become larger and more frequent as the planet warms.</p> <p>The United States was not the only country to see a big rebound in fossil fuel use last year. In November, researchers at the Global Carbon Project estimated that global carbon-dioxide emissions from energy and industry rose 4.9 percent in 2021, after a 5.4 percent decline in 2020. China, India and the European Union all had major increases, suggesting that any climate effect from the pandemic was fleeting.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Uganda schools reopen; lost generation?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/10/world/africa/uganda-schools-reopen.html
GIST	<p>KAMPALA, Uganda — Uganda reopened its schools on Monday after the longest pandemic-prompted shutdown in the world, but educators and others say that the closing has taken a lasting toll, eroding decades of classroom gains in the East African nation.</p> <p>Despite efforts at remote education, more than half of Uganda's students effectively stopped learning after the government ordered classrooms closed in March 2020, a government agency has found.</p> <p>And the outlook is not optimistic: Up to a third of students, many of whom took jobs during the pandemic to support their struggling families, may not return to the classroom. Thousands of schools, themselves under financial stress, are not expected to reopen their doors. And countless teachers will not come back either, having turned to other work after losing their income during the shutdown.</p> <p>"The damage is extremely big," said Mary Goretti Nakabugo, the executive director of Uwezo Uganda, a Uganda-based nonprofit that conducts educational research. Unless there are intensive efforts to help students catch up, she said, "we may have lost a generation."</p> <p>Among that generation is Kauthara Shadiha Nabasitu, 15, who has abandoned plans to continue her education in high school. Though elementary education in Uganda is free and is intended to be compulsory, high school education is discretionary and tuition-based.</p> <p>"I am a person who wants to study," said Ms. Nabasitu, 15, who started selling juice and braiding hair in the low-income Kamwokya neighborhood of Kampala to help her family during the shutdown.</p> <p>It was important, though, Ms. Nabasitu said, for her to "help my mom with the burdens that she carries." Her mother, a vegetable seller, told her that she would not be able to pay for her high school education, Ms. Nabasitu added.</p> <p>Ms. Nabasitu said that she missed the safety and sense of community that school offered, a loss felt by her friends as well. During the pandemic, she said, some friends became pregnant and won't return to school either.</p> <p>Many countries closed schools on and off over the past two years, but only six nations — the Bahamas, Belize, Brunei, the Dominican Republic and the Philippines are the others — have continued to impose nationwide closures, according to UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.</p>

Uganda's shutdown, instituted shortly after the first Covid cases were detected in the country, was the longest of all — affecting 10.4 million students — and the duration has been the subject of debate, domestically and internationally.

“Our call during Covid has been that schools should be the last to close and the first to open,” said Robert Jenkins, global director of education at the United Nations Children's Fund. “In the case of Uganda, the scale and the duration have been unprecedented.”

Janet Museveni, the Ugandan minister of education and the wife of [President Yoweri Museveni](#), said that the shutdown had been [introduced to curb](#) the risk of children spreading the virus to their parents. The children, she said, “would become orphans — just like H.I.V./AIDS did to many of the families.”

Critics and opposition figures contend that officials used Covid as a pretext to impose especially [stringent lockdown rules](#) intended [to suppress dissent](#) ahead of the January 2021 elections and in [the many violent and tense months that followed](#). The government is now simply more confident that it is in control, they argue, allowing it to turn its attention to reopening the economy.

Although vaccination rates in the total population are low overall — single digits percentage-wise — the authorities say that most teachers are now inoculated, which enables them to reopen classrooms. Still, the reopening — bars and concerts venues will follow in two weeks — comes amid [a fourth wave of the pandemic](#) that has led to a nearly 200 percent rise in cases over the past 14 days.

“We believe this time Covid will not scare us,” Joyce Moriku Kaducu, the state minister for primary education, said in an interview. She disputed any notion that young people's education had been sacrificed.

“I don't accept that there is a lost generation,” Dr. Kaducu said. “What I agree to is there's a percentage of our children who have gotten pregnant, the young boys have gotten into the moneymaking economy and others have gone into things. That does not mean that we have lost the generation completely.”

Still, even the government's own data shows that the nearly two-year interruption in classroom lessons took a heavy toll on students, particularly those from poor and rural communities.

Education officials introduced remote lessons via television, radio and the internet, but many households do not have ready access to electronic devices or electricity, and are led by parents with limited education themselves, hindering their ability to help their children.

As a result, 51 percent of students stopped learning when the schools closed, according to a report by the National Planning Authority, a government agency, and as many as a third may not return to the classroom now.

Many teachers will not come back either.

Ariiho Ambrose, 29, taught mathematics and science at an elementary school in Wakiso District in the Central Region of Uganda, making \$110 a month.

But after the pandemic hit, he was paid only a month's salary, pushing him to find an alternative to support his wife and two children. He finally landed a job with a telecommunications company, where he says he works fewer hours and is paid more, up to \$180 a month.

Though the school wants him to return, he has declined. “I will miss teaching children,” he said.

Some students and teachers who aim to return might not find their schools open. The national planning agency said that 3,507 elementary and 832 high schools nationwide might not reopen on Monday and were likely to remain permanently closed. Uganda has a mix of government-run schools and private ones owned by individuals or religious organizations.

The closings, educators say, threaten to undo decades of educational progress in Uganda, which was one of the first African countries to offer free elementary school education, in 1997. That effort, funded by donors, lifted enrollment, recruited teachers and led to the construction of schools.

St. Divine Community Nursery School in Kampala, which once had 220 students and eight teachers, is among those that will not reopen. Its owner, Joshua Twinamatsiko, had to close the school six months after the shutdown because he couldn't afford the \$425 monthly rent. He lost an investment of about \$8,500, he said.

"It has been challenging for me to see all my efforts and money go to waste," Mr. Twinamatsiko said in an interview.

Now, after nearly two years of caution, the government is pushing to get as many students as possible back to school. The authorities have enlisted village elders and church leaders to encourage families to re-enroll their children. Covid testing of students is [not required](#) to return to the classroom, and Ms. Museveni, the education minister, has [warned school officials](#) not to impose excessive tuition or fees.

Some of the reopening measures [could be reversed](#), Mr. Museveni, the president, said, if the health care system becomes overwhelmed.

David Atwiine, 15, hopes that will not be the case. He started selling masks in the streets of Kampala after the shutdown was imposed, making \$5 on a good day. But no amount of money, he said, will stop him from seeking the education he sees as necessary to succeed.

"I must return to school and study," he said.

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HEADLINE	01/10 Covid test misinformation on social media
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/10/technology/covid-test-misinformation.html
GIST	<p>On Dec. 29, The Gateway Pundit, a far-right website that often spreads conspiracy theories, published an article falsely implying that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had withdrawn authorization of all P.C.R. tests for detecting Covid-19. The article collected 22,000 likes, comments and shares on Facebook and Twitter.</p> <p>On TikTok and Instagram, videos of at-home Covid-19 tests displaying positive results after being soaked in drinking water and juice have gone viral in recent weeks, and were used to push the false narrative that coronavirus rapid tests don't work. Some household liquids can make a test show a positive result, health experts say, but the tests remain accurate when used as directed. One TikTok video showing a home test that came out positive after being placed under running water was shared at least 140,000 times.</p> <p>And on YouTube, a video titled "Rapid antigen tests debunked" was posted on Jan. 1 by the Canadian far-right website Rebel News. It generated over 40,000 views, and its comments section was a hotbed of misinformation. "The straight up purpose of this test is to keep the case #'s as high as possible to maintain fear & incentive for more restrictions," said one comment with more than 200 likes. "And of course Profit."</p> <p>Misinformation about Covid-19 tests has spiked across social media in recent weeks, researchers say, as coronavirus cases have surged again worldwide because of the highly infectious Omicron variant.</p> <p>The burst of misinformation threatens to further stymie public efforts to keep the health crisis under control. Previous spikes in pandemic-related falsehoods focused on the vaccines, masks and the severity of the virus. The falsehoods help undermine best practices for controlling the spread of the coronavirus, health experts say, noting that misinformation remains a key factor in vaccine hesitancy.</p>

The categories include falsehoods that P.C.R. tests don't work; that the counts for flu and Covid-19 cases have been combined; that P.C.R. tests are vaccines in disguise; and that at-home rapid tests have a predetermined result or are unreliable because different liquids can turn them positive.

These themes jumped into the thousands of mentions in the last three months of 2021, compared with just a few dozen in the same time period in 2020, according to Zignal Labs, which tracks mentions on social media, on cable television and in print and online outlets.

The added demand for testing due to Omicron and the higher prevalence of breakthrough cases has given purveyors of misinformation an "opportune moment" to exploit, said Kolina Koltai, a researcher at the University of Washington who studies online conspiracy theories. The false narratives "support the whole idea of not trusting the infection numbers or trusting the death count," she said.

The Gateway Pundit did not respond to a request for comment. TikTok pointed to its [policies](#) that prohibit misinformation that could cause harm to people's physical health. YouTube said it was reviewing the videos shared by The New York Times in line with its Covid-19 misinformation [policies](#) on testing and diagnostics. Twitter said that it had applied a warning to The Gateway Pundit's article in December for violating its [coronavirus misinformation policy](#) and that tweets containing false information about widely accepted testing methods would also violate its policy. But the company said it does not take action on [personal anecdotes](#).

Facebook said it had worked with its fact-checking partners to label many of the posts with warnings that directed people toward fact checks of the false claims, and reduced their prominence on its users' feeds.

"The challenges of the pandemic are constantly changing, and we're consistently monitoring for emerging false claims on our platforms," Aaron Simpson, a Facebook spokesman, said in an email.

No medical test is perfect, and legitimate questions about the accuracy of Covid-19 tests have abounded throughout the pandemic. There has [always been a risk](#) of a false positive or a false negative result. The Food and Drug Administration says there is a potential for [antigen tests to return false positive results](#) when users do not follow the instructions. Those tests are generally accurate when used correctly but in some cases can appear to show a positive result when exposed to other liquids, said Dr. Glenn Patriquin, who published a [study](#) about false positives in antigen tests using various liquids in a publication of the American Society for Microbiology.

"Using a fluid with a different chemical makeup than what was designed means that result lines might appear unpredictably," said Dr. Patriquin, an assistant professor of pathology at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia.

Complicating matters, there have been some defective products. Last year, the Australian company Ellume [recalled](#) about two million of the at-home testing products that it had shipped to the United States.

But [when used correctly](#), coronavirus tests are considered reliable at detecting people carrying high levels of the virus. Experts say our evolving knowledge of tests should be a distinct issue from lies about testing that have spread widely on social media — though it does make debunking those lies more challenging.

"Science is inherently uncertain and changes, which makes tackling misinformation exceedingly difficult," Ms. Koltai said.

Researchers say that the falsehoods are rising despite efforts by social media companies to crack down, and that many contain lies that had surfaced in the past.

The surge "fits with the misinformation industry's pattern during the pandemic," said John Gregory, deputy health editor at NewsGuard, which rates the credibility of news sites and has tracked the prevalence of Covid-19 and vaccine misinformation. "Whatever the current mainstream story is, they seek their own narrative to undermine it."

The C.D.C. [said](#) in July that it would withdraw its request to the Food and Drug Administration for emergency-use authorization of one specific test at the end of the year. Hundreds of other Covid-19 tests are still available from other manufacturers, [the C.D.C. later clarified](#).

Still, posts claiming that the agency had withdrawn support of P.C.R. tests went viral on Facebook. The most widely shared post pushing the falsehood in July collected 11,500 likes, shares and comments, according to data from CrowdTangle, a Facebook-owned social media analytics tool. The post added the falsehood that the C.D.C.'s advisory meant that P.C.R. tests could not distinguish between the coronavirus and the flu, when in fact the agency had simply recommended the use of tests that could simultaneously detect and distinguish between the flu and Covid-19.

[Despite being fact-checked](#) within days, the claim never fully went away. The Gateway Pundit article revived the claim at the end of the year, collecting nearly double the earlier post's likes, shares and comments on Facebook. On Instagram, screenshots of the article also went viral, collecting hundreds of likes.

Mr. Gregory said a similar phenomenon had occurred with social media posts claiming various liquids turned at-home coronavirus tests positive.

On Dec. 23, 2020, a video on YouTube showed coronavirus tests turning positive after being tested on kiwi, orange and berry fruit juice. It collected over 102,000 views. In the same month, a video producing the same results with Coca-Cola was posted on YouTube, collecting 16,800 views.

One year later, a spate of similar videos with the same theme appeared on TikTok and Instagram.

For Ms. Koltai, the re-emergence of false narratives even after social media companies labeled them a year earlier shows the power of misinformation to "thrive when it can latch on to a current event."

"That is how narratives can peak at different times," she said.

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HEADLINE	01/09 HHS: 24% hospitals 'critical staff shortage'
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/09/health/us-coronavirus-sunday/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)About 24% of US hospitals are reporting a "critical staffing shortage," according to data from the US Department of Health and Human Services, as public health experts warn the Covid-19 surge fueled by the Omicron variant threatens the nation's health care system.</p> <p>"Given how much infection there is, our hospitals really are at the brink right now," Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of Brown University's School of Public Health, told CNN on Sunday.</p> <p>Of the approximately 5,000 hospitals that reported this data to HHS on Saturday, nearly 1,200 -- about 1 in 4 -- said they are currently experiencing a critical staffing shortage, the largest share of the entire pandemic. More than 100 other hospitals said they anticipate a shortage within the next week.</p> <p>The US health care system is Jha's greatest concern, he said, noting the Omicron surge could hamper its capacity to care for patients suffering from conditions other than Covid-19.</p> <p>"The health care system is not <i>just</i> designed to take care of people with Covid ... it's designed to take care of kids with appendicitis and people who have heart attacks and get into car accidents," he said.</p> <p>"And all of that is going to be much, much more difficult because we have a large proportion of the population that is not vaccinated, plenty of high risk people who are not boosted," he said. "That combination sets up a large pool of people who as they get infected will end up really straining the resources we have in the hospitals today."</p>

These staff shortages are growing as frontline health care workers are either infected or forced to quarantine due to exposure to Covid-19 just as the demand for treatment skyrockets: More than 138,000 Covid-19 patients [were in US hospitals](#) as of Saturday, according to the [Department of Health and Human Services](#). That's not far from the all-time peak (about 142,200 in mid-January 2021) and an increase from around 45,000 in early November.

To safeguard hospital capacity, some facilities are forced to [cut elective surgeries](#). In New York, for example, 40 hospitals -- mainly in the Mohawk Valley, Finger Lakes and central regions -- have been told to stop nonessential elective operations for at least two weeks because of low patient bed capacity, the state health department said Saturday.

The University of Kansas Health System is also close to implementing crisis standards of care, Chief Medical Officer Dr. Steven Stites said Saturday, telling CNN, "At some point ... we're too overwhelmed to do any of our normal daily work."

"At that point we have to turn on a switch that says we got to triage the people we can help the most," he said, "and that means we've have to let some people die who we might have been able to help but we weren't sure about -- they were too far gone or had too much of an injury, or maybe we can't get to that trauma that just came in."

Stites said two waves were hitting Kansas simultaneously -- with Delta accelerating post-Thanksgiving, to be met by Omicron -- describing it as "almost a double pandemic." The vast majority of those being hospitalized are unvaccinated, Stites said.

Dr. Jonathan Reiner, professor of medicine and surgery at George Washington University, told CNN on Saturday the next several weeks will "look bad in many American cities."

"Forty hospitals in New York just canceled elective procedures. The DC Hospital Association, where I work, has asked the DC government for permission for hospitals to enact crisis standards of care," he said. "And that's coming to every city in the United States."

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HEADLINE	01/09 Pass closures impact supply chain
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/traffic/traffic-news/lengthy-cascade-mountain-pass-closures-impacting-supply-chain-trucker-association-says/281-6fc345c2-361e-4f20-8866-151b9646e1e4
GIST	<p>NORTH BEND, Wash. — The pass closures in the Cascade mountains are a "real example" of how fast goods can run out if the state's supply chain is interrupted, according to the executive vice president of the Washington Trucker Associations.</p> <p>Supply shortages, such as fuel, have been reported in Wenatchee and other areas of Washington state because of the closures, according to Sheri Call.</p> <p>"The longer trucks are unable to travel, the worse the shortages and backlogs will become," a statement from Call reads. "Food, water, medical supplies, and fuel are all important for the public good. However, to keep all areas of the supply chain functioning, continuous, safe delivery of all goods has rightly been made a priority."</p> <p>"We're grateful to the state's Emergency Management Division for recognizing this and facilitating a broad, short-term hours of service waiver with the governor's office to help expedite delayed freight," the statement continues.</p> <p>Blewett, Snoqualmie, Stevens and White passes were closed since Jan. 6 due to heavy snow and unsafe travel conditions.</p>

	<p>Snoqualmie and Blewett passes reopened Sunday evening. The state said the priority was to "get freight moving." Other trips should be delayed as work continues to reopen the pass to general traffic, according to the Washington State Department of Transportation. However, general traffic was not turned away.</p> <p>White Pass is unlikely to open before Monday due to a substantial amount of snow and debris still covering the roadway, according to an update from WSDOT. The pass remains closed between milepost 135 at Oak Creek and milepost 183. Local traffic from the eastside is allowed up to Lower Tieton Road at milepost 168.</p> <p>Stevens Pass will likely remain closed until Tuesday. US 2 is closed from milepost 58 to milepost 99 at the west end of Leavenworth following heavy snow accumulation and high avalanche danger.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Southwest WA worst flooding in a decade
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/newsletters-deprecated/news-brief-newsletter-deprecated/southwest-washington-saw-its-worst-flooding-in-a-decade-with-recent-storms
GIST	<p>SEATTLE (AP) — Flooding coursed over roads, inundated farmland and curtailed access to a Native American reservation in Washington state on Sunday as the Pacific Northwest slowly recovered from a series of storms that have engulfed the region with rain and snow.</p> <p>The swollen Chehalis River was expected to crest Sunday as the region enjoyed a dry weekend after a series of winter storms since Dec. 17. Crews, meanwhile, worked to open several major highways connecting Seattle to the east that have been closed for days by heavy snow, avalanches and debris.</p> <p>Southwest Washington has experienced its worst flooding in a decade and some rivers crested at more than 18 feet (5.5 meters) last week, the National Weather Service said. Washington Gov. Jay Inslee issued an emergency proclamation on Friday.</p> <p>The weather service issued flood warnings Sunday for Grays Harbor and Thurston counties. It said moderate flooding in the Chehalis River was affecting road access to the Chehalis Reservation near Oakville. A flood warning continued for the Pudding River in Oregon's Clackamas and Marion counties.</p> <p>In Washington's Grays County, authorities were searching for a man reported missing after driving into floodwaters in Elma early Sunday, but it wasn't known if the man was swept away or walked out on his own, said Undersheriff Brad Johansson.</p> <p>The search came after emergency workers said Saturday they had recovered the body of a 72-year-old man whose vehicle was swept away by flooding near Cosmopolis.</p> <p>Crews worked to open several major highways connecting Seattle to the east, including Interstate 90 over Snoqualmie Pass and U.S. Highway 97 over Blewitt Pass, the Washington Department of Transportation said.</p> <p>U.S. 12 over White Pass may reopen Monday, the department said. But avalanche danger and multiple snowslides reaching 35 feet (10.5 meters) made it unlikely that a 44-mile (70 kilometer) stretch of U.S. 2 over Stevens Pass would reopen before Tuesday.</p> <p>At the eastern end of that stretch of U.S. 2, the National Guard was deployed to the hard-hit city village of Leavenworth in the Cascade Mountains for snow cleanup, food delivery and other services. Mayor Carl Florea asked for Guard help after the resort received 4 feet (6.4 meters) of snow in 48 hours last week.</p> <p>Kelly Kortman spent the last three days clearing snow off decks and roofs of four cabins in the area he rents to vacationers, trying to make sure they don't collapse.</p> <p>"It is a surreal state of affairs, it's beyond the pale," Kortman told The Seattle Times.</p>

HEADLINE	01/09 Landslide dangers across Puget Sound
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/landslide-dangers-across-puget-sound-from-excessive-rain-and-snowmelt
GIST	<p>So much rain and snow in such a short period of time have really dialed up the threat of landslides across Western Washington.</p> <p>In Magnolia, a landslide knocked a home off its foundation and trapped a man. That man is now out of the hospital.</p> <p>To see the damage a landslide did to this home on Perkins Lane in Magnolia. To imagine the horror a man and woman there faced as a wall of mud came crashing into their place.</p> <p>“It’s very scary,” said Myra Karp of Magnolia.</p> <p>She lives just down the street from where Friday’s slide happened.</p> <p>Karp survived a harrowing experience about four decades ago. A wall of mud and debris slammed into her home and the house right next door.</p> <p>“I was very lucky it came down. It came down and across the street and wiped out a car parked across the street next door. It came as far as my kitchen door,” said Karp.</p> <p>The National Weather Service says Seattle got 4 inches of rain in 48 hours.</p> <p>All that water plus the snow and snowmelt has been wreaking havoc across our region.</p> <p>“It was a lot of water all at once. That was trying to go through the soil,” said Mary Butwin, a meteorologist with National Weather Service. “As the water drains through, it loosens things up which makes the area prone to landslides.”</p> <p>The rain has stopped but the landslide danger is still there.</p> <p>“Any of the steeper hills, mountainsides, cliffs-- they’re the most prone to it,” said Butwin.</p> <p>Geologists checked on a landslide in West Seattle where the hillside was still very muddy and unstable. That landslide Friday brought a tree down on the powerlines along Highland Park Way Southwest and Southwest Othello Street.</p> <p>SDOT said crews worked as fast as they could to clear away the debris. That road from Holden Street to West Marginal Way finally reopened Saturday night.</p> <p>On the Burt Gilman Trail by 130th Street, a hillside gave way because of all the moisture. The damage amounted to 11 dump trucks worth of debris and mud, according to an SDOT employee.</p> <p>Miles away, a viewer shared images on Twitter saying that Whidbey Island will be “smaller in size after this series of January storms.”</p> <p>Near Three Tree Point, west of SeaTac, the road was buried under a mountain of debris.</p> <p>The National Weather Service said Western Washington has had plenty of rain and the threat of landslides is everywhere. But those threats will lessen as the rain moves out.</p>
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SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/kazakhstan-detains-7939-people-over-unrest-2022-01-10/
GIST	<p>NUR-SULTAN, Jan 10 (Reuters) - Kazakhstan said on Monday that foreign-trained Islamist radicals were among those who had attacked government buildings and security forces last week and that police had now detained almost 8,000 people to bring the situation under control.</p> <p>Government buildings in several cities were briefly captured or torched last week as initially peaceful protests against fuel price increases became violent in the worst bout of violence in the Central Asian nation's post-Soviet history.</p> <p>President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev sacked his cabinet, issued shoot-to-kill orders and declared a state of emergency in the oil-rich nation of 19 million. He also asked a Russian-led military bloc to send in troops, who the government says have since been deployed to guard strategic objects.</p> <p>Tokayev was due to take part in a video conference of the bloc's leaders at 0700 GMT on Monday.</p> <p>Authorities on Monday for the first time linked the violence to what they said were members of Islamist groups.</p> <p>"As the events in Almaty and several other regions of the country have shown, Kazakhstan has been subjected to armed aggression by well-coordinated terrorist groups trained abroad," the foreign ministry said in a statement.</p> <p>"According to preliminary data, the attackers include individuals who have military combat zone experience in the ranks of radical Islamist groups."</p> <p>It did not name any specific groups.</p> <p>The National Security Committee said on Monday, an official day of mourning, that the situation had stabilised and that security forces had restored control.</p> <p>Karim Masimov, the committee's former head, was detained on suspicion of treason last week, days after Tokayev dismissed him.</p> <p>Russian and state media, citing a government social media post, have reported that 164 people had been killed. Health and police authorities did not confirm that figure, and the original social media post has been deleted.</p> <p>"I think there was some kind of a conspiracy involving domestic and certain foreign destructive forces," Secretary of State Yerlan Karin told state television on Monday, without naming any suspects.</p> <p>A former Kazakh prime minister told Reuters on Sunday that Tokayev must move fast to consolidate his grip after appearing to break with Nursultan Nazarbayev, his powerful predecessor.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 US warns Iran if Americans attacked
SOURCE	https://www.newsmax.com/world/globaltalk/iran-us-warns-americans/2022/01/09/id/1051617/
GIST	<p>Iran will face severe consequences if it attacks Americans, the White House said on Sunday, including any of those sanctioned by Tehran for the 2020 killing of General Qassem Soleimani in a drone strike.</p> <p>White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said Iran's sanctions on Saturday came as Tehran's proxy militias continue to attack American troops in the Middle East.</p> <p>"We will work with our allies and partners to deter and respond to any attacks carried out by Iran," Sullivan said in a statement. "Should Iran attack any of our nationals, including any of the 52 people named yesterday, it will face severe consequences."</p>

	<p>Iran on Saturday imposed sanctions on dozens more Americans, many of them from the U.S. military, over the 2020 killing of Soleimani.</p> <p>Iran's Foreign Ministry said 51 Americans had been targeted for what it called "terrorism" and human rights violations. The step lets Iranian authorities seize any assets they hold in Iran, but the apparent absence of such assets means it will likely be symbolic.</p> <p>It was not clear why Sullivan's statement referred to 52 people when Tehran said it had sanctioned 51.</p> <p>Iran's sanctions included U.S. General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It also included former White House national security adviser Robert O'Brien.</p> <p>Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force, the overseas arm of the elite Revolutionary Guards, was killed in Iraq in a drone strike on Jan. 3, 2020, ordered by then President Donald Trump.</p> <p>A year ago, Iran imposed sanctions on Trump and several senior U.S. officials.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 New Covid variant emerges? 'Deltacron'
SOURCE	https://www.cnbc.com/2022/01/08/cyprus-reportedly-discovers-a-covid-variant-that-combines-omicron-and-delta.html
GIST	<p>A researcher in Cyprus has discovered a strain of the coronavirus that combines the delta and omicron variant, Bloomberg News reported on Saturday.</p> <p>Leondios Kostrikis, professor of biological sciences at the University of Cyprus, called the strain "deltacron," because of its omicron-like genetic signatures within the delta genomes, Bloomberg said.</p> <p>So far, Kostrikis and his team have found 25 cases of the virus, according to the report. It's still too early to tell whether there are more cases of the strain or what impacts it could have.</p> <p>"We will see in the future if this strain is more pathological or more contagious or if it will prevail" against the two dominant strains, delta and omicron, Kostrikis said in an interview with Sigma TV Friday. He believes omicron will also overtake deltacron, he added.</p> <p>The researchers sent their findings this week to GISAID, an international database that tracks viruses, according to Bloomberg.</p> <p>The deltacron variant comes as omicron continues its rapid spread across the globe, causing a surge in Covid-19 cases. The U.S. is reporting a seven-day average of more than 600,000 new cases daily, according to a CNBC analysis Friday of data from Johns Hopkins University. That's a 72% increase from the previous week and a pandemic record.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Virgin Australia cuts 25% capacity
SOURCE	https://www.foxbusiness.com/healthcare/virgin-australia-to-cut-capacity-by-25-as-covid-19-cases-rise
GIST	<p>SYDNEY - Virgin Australia said on Monday it would reduce capacity across its network by around 25% for the rest of January and for February due to reduced travel demand and staff being required to isolate as COVID-19 case numbers rise in Australia.</p> <p>The airline, which competes against Qantas Airways Ltd, said it would cut some flight frequencies and suspend 10 routes temporarily.</p>

	<p>Australia on Monday surpassed 1 million COVID-19 cases, with more than half of them recorded in the past week, as the Omicron variant ripped through most of the country driving up hospitalization numbers and putting a strain on supply chains.</p> <p>Virgin Australia Chief Executive Jayne Hrdlicka said the surge in COVID-19 cases had affected customer confidence.</p> <p>"Virgin Australia remains focused on growing its network and consumer reach and will resume services as soon travel demand improves," she said in a statement.</p> <p>The airline said in November it would add seven more Boeing Co 737 NG planes to its fleet, nearly restoring it to pre-pandemic levels, to help meet a goal of obtaining a one-third share of Australia's domestic travel market.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Omicron problem: stay home, work sick?
SOURCE	https://www.foxbusiness.com/healthcare/omicron-poses-a-conundrum-stay-home-or-work-sick
GIST	<p>As the raging omicron variant of COVID-19 infects workers across the nation, millions of those whose jobs don't provide paid sick days are having to choose between their health and their paycheck.</p> <p>While many companies instituted more robust sick leave policies at the beginning of the pandemic, some of those have since been scaled back with the rollout of the vaccines, even though omicron has managed to evade the shots. Meanwhile, the current labor shortage is adding to the pressure of workers having to decide whether to show up to their job sick if they can't afford to stay home.</p> <p>"It's a vicious cycle," said Daniel Schneider, professor of public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. "As staffing gets depleted because people are out sick, that means that those that are on the job have more to do and are even more reluctant to call in sick when they in turn get sick."</p> <p>Low-income hourly workers are especially vulnerable. Nearly 80% of all private sector workers get at least one paid sick day, according to a national compensation survey of employee benefits conducted in March by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. But only 33% of workers whose wages are at the bottom 10% get paid sick leave, compared with 95% in the top 10%.</p> <p>A survey this past fall of roughly 6,600 hourly low-wage workers conducted by Harvard's Shift Project, which focuses on inequality, found that 65% of those workers who reported being sick in the last month said they went to work anyway. That's lower than the 85% who showed up to work sick before the pandemic, but much higher than it should be in the middle of a public health crisis. Schneider says it could get worse because of omicron and the labor shortage.</p> <p>What's more, Schneider noted that the share of workers with paid sick leave before the pandemic barely budged during the pandemic — 50% versus 51% respectively. He further noted many of the working poor surveyed don't even have \$400 in emergency funds, and families will now be even more financially strapped with the expiration of the child tax credit, which had put a few hundred dollars in families' pockets every month.</p> <p>The Associated Press interviewed one worker who started a new job with the state of New Mexico last month and started experiencing COVID-like symptoms earlier in the week. The worker, who asked not to be named because it might jeopardize their employment, took a day off to get tested and two more days to wait for the results.</p> <p>A supervisor called and told the worker they would qualify for paid sick days only if the COVID test turns out to be positive. If the test is negative, the worker will have to take the days without pay, since they haven't accrued enough time for sick leave.</p>

"I thought I was doing the right thing by protecting my co-workers," said the worker, who is still awaiting the results and estimates it will cost \$160 per day of work missed if they test negative. "Now I wish I just would've gone to work and not said anything."

A Trader Joe's worker in California, who also asked not to be named because they didn't want to risk their job, said the company lets workers accrue paid time off that they can use for vacations or sick days. But once that time is used up, employees often feel like they can't afford to take unpaid days.

"I think many people now come to work sick or with what they call 'allergies' because they feel they have no other choice," the worker said.

Trader Joe's offered hazard pay until last spring, and even paid time off if workers had COVID-related symptoms. But the worker said those benefits have ended. The company also no longer requires customers to wear masks in all of its stores.

Other companies are similarly curtailing sick time that they offered earlier in the pandemic. Kroger, the country's biggest traditional grocery chain, is ending some benefits for unvaccinated workers in an attempt to compel more of them to get the jab as COVID-19 cases rise again. Unvaccinated workers will no longer be eligible to receive up to two weeks paid emergency leave if they become infected — a policy that was put into place last year when vaccines were unavailable.

Meanwhile, Walmart, the nation's largest retailer, is slashing pandemic-related paid leave in half — from two weeks to one — after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reduced isolation requirements for people who don't have symptoms after they test positive.

Workers have received some relief from a growing number of states. In the last decade, 14 states and the District of Columbia have passed laws or ballot measures requiring employers to provide paid sick leave, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

On the federal front, however, the movement has stalled. Congress passed a law in the spring of 2020 requiring most employers to provide paid sick leave for employees with COVID-related illnesses. But the requirement expired on Dec. 31 of that same year. Congress later extended tax credits for employers who voluntarily provide paid sick leave, but the extension lapsed at the end of September, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

In November, the U.S. House passed a version of President Joe Biden's Build Back Better plan that would require employers to provide 20 days of paid leave for employees who are sick or caring for a family member. But the fate of that bill is uncertain in the Senate.

"We can't do a patchwork sort of thing. It has to be holistic. It has to be meaningful," said Josephine Kalipeni, executive director at Family Values @ Work, a national network of 27 state and local coalitions helping to advocate for such policies as paid sick days.

The U.S. is one of only 11 countries worldwide without any federal mandate for paid sick leave, according to a 2020 study by the World Policy Analysis Center at the University of California, Los Angeles.

On the flipside are small business owners like Dawn Crawley, CEO of House Cleaning Heroes, who can't afford to pay workers when they are out sick. But Crawley is trying to help in other ways. She recently drove one cleaner who didn't have a car to a nearby testing site. She later bought the cleaner some medicine, orange juice and oranges.

"If they are out, I try to give them money but at the same time my company has got to survive," Crawley said. "If the company goes under, no one has work."

Even when paid sick leave is available, workers aren't always made aware of it.

	<p>Ingrid Vilorio, who works at a Jack in the Box restaurant in Castro Valley, California, started feeling sick last March and soon tested positive for COVID. Vilorio alerted a supervisor, who didn't tell her she was eligible for paid sick leave — as well as supplemental COVID leave — under California law.</p> <p>Vilorio said her doctor told her to take 15 days off, but she decided to take just 10 because she had bills to pay. Months later, a co-worker told Vilorio she was owed sick pay for the time she was off. Working through Fight for \$15, a group that works to unionize fast food workers, Vilorio and her colleagues reported the restaurant to the county health department. Shortly after that, she was given back pay.</p> <p>But Vilorio, who speaks Spanish, said through a translator that problems persist. Workers are still getting sick, she said, and are often afraid to speak up.</p> <p>"Without our health, we can't work," she said. "We're told that we're front line workers, but we're not treated like it."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 West African leaders new sanctions on Mali
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Business/wireStory/west-african-leaders-signal-oppose-mali-junta-extension-82163485
GIST	<p>ACCRA, Ghana -- West African regional leaders imposed new sanctions Sunday on Mali, suspending most commerce and financial aid to the country after its military rulers said they would stay in power for four more years instead of holding an election next month as promised.</p> <p>In a veiled threat at possible military pressure, the regional bloc known as ECOWAS activated its standby force, saying it “will have to be ready for any eventuality.”</p> <p>The sanctions mark the steepest consequences for Mali to date, and include land and air border closures with other countries belonging to ECOWAS, according to a statement released after a day-long meeting in Ghana's capital.</p> <p>The junta led by Col. Assimi Goita initially had agreed to hold a new election in late February, 18 months after it first seized power. The military leadership now says the next presidential election will take place instead in 2026, giving Goita four more years in power.</p> <p>In a statement, regional leaders called this timeframe “totally unacceptable” and said it “simply means that an illegitimate military transition government will take the Malian people hostage during the next five years.”</p> <p>The business sanctions won't apply to essentials like pharmaceuticals, and medical supplies and equipment to fight COVID-19. Petroleum products and electricity are also excluded, the regional bloc said.</p> <p>But all of Mali's financial assets held in the regional bloc's central bank and other commercial banks will be blocked. And ECOWAS will suspend its financial aid to Mali. Previous sanctions had only targeted junta leadership with travel bans and asset freezes.</p> <p>After overthrowing Mali's democratically elected president, coup leader Goita had promised to swiftly return the country to democratic rule. Doubts deepened about his intentions, though, after he effectively launched a second coup nine months later, forcing out the chosen transitional civilian leaders and becoming president himself.</p> <p>Mali's junta maintains that elections can't be held because of deepening insecurity across the country, where Islamic extremists have been fighting a decade-long insurgency. They also say it's essential to draft a new constitution and put it before voters in a referendum, a lengthy endeavor that would pave the way for new local and legislative elections before any presidential vote.</p>

	<p>The French military, which helped push the militants from power in northern Mali in 2013, is now in the process of drawing down its troop presence in Mali. Many fear their departure will only deepen the crisis despite the presence of U.N. peacekeepers and regional forces bolstering Malian troops' efforts.</p> <p>Critics of the junta fear that the political turmoil will further undermine the Malian military's response to Islamic extremist attacks at a time when they will increasingly be bearing the responsibility for fighting militants.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Russia eyes former Soviet Republics
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/russias-putin-seizes-on-crises-to-assert-control-over-former-soviet-republics-11641738063?mod=hp_lead_pos5
GIST	<p>MOSCOW—The flood of Russian troops into Kazakhstan to help shore up the embattled government sends a clear signal to both the West and other former Soviet republics: Russian President Vladimir Putin will brook no threat to what he views as Russia's inviolable sphere of influence.</p> <p>The venture into Kazakhstan, at the request of the country's leader, follows nearly 15 years of Russian interventionism in Georgia, Belarus, Ukraine and elsewhere aimed at pulling these countries even closer to Russia, by propping up leaders aligned with the Kremlin, playing regional power-broker, or trying to weaken those who have shown deference to the West.</p> <p>Mr. Putin's determination to reassert Russian hegemony in the former Soviet sphere is largely based on his view that the demise of the U.S.S.R. was "a major geopolitical disaster."</p> <p>He sees mutual benefits in deeper integration between Russia and the former Soviet republics and is determined to rebuff what he sees as the threat of an encroachment eastward of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, analysts said. He is also eager to leave a legacy that positions Russia as a superpower to be both respected and feared, they said.</p> <p>Mr. Putin's efforts to assert Russia's influence over its backyard have culminated in his current standoff with the West over Ukraine—a country sitting on the Russian border that seeks closer military and economic ties with the West and that has been the site of popular protests against pro-Russian leaders.</p> <p>Mr. Putin, who contends that NATO and the U.S. have used Ukraine to extend military activities to Russia's border, has amassed about 100,000 troops on Ukraine's border. On Monday, Russian and U.S. officials will meet to discuss Moscow's demands that NATO halt its eastern expansion.</p> <p>In those talks, the Kremlin could take the opportunity to depict the crisis and the call for help from Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev as proof of Russia's role as the protector of regional order and stability, analysts said.</p> <p>Mr. Tokayev requested military help in quelling violent protests originally sparked by popular anger over a rise in fuel prices in his country. The Kremlin leader deployed thousands of troops to the country.</p> <p>"Putin will be going to the meeting and saying, 'See, this is why I need to have a special position in the regional security of the former Soviet space and other parts of our near abroad, because without me, things like this will spiral,' " said Maximilian Hess, a Central Asia fellow in the Eurasia Program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, a U.S. think tank.</p> <p>Officials in Moscow and Kremlin supporters insist that Russia is simply offering help to what the foreign ministry described as a "brotherly neighboring nation" and Russia wants nothing more than to help restore peace in Kazakhstan, legally and through dialogue, "not through street riots and violation of laws," the ministry said in a statement last week.</p>

In recent years, a series of crises in Russia's neighbors have undercut Moscow's efforts to more closely integrate countries spanning from Central Asia to Eastern Europe, as citizens of some former satellite states protest stagnating economies, a lack of democratic freedoms and corrupt leadership.

The Kremlin has watched with concern growing pro-Western sentiment in countries such as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, ultimately intervening to help quash dissent and support pro-Russian sides.

In 2008, [Russian forces rolled into Georgia](#), a staunch U.S. ally, after Moscow accused the Caucasus nation of aggression against South Ossetia, a pro-Kremlin breakaway region, where Russia still stations troops.

That move would portend more than a decade of Russian adventurism.

Revolts toppled a Putin protégé in Ukraine in 2014. The Kremlin lashed back by [annexing the Crimean Peninsula](#) and throwing support behind pro-Russian separatists in a slow-burning conflict that continues in eastern Ukraine.

In neighboring Belarus, the Kremlin has offered financial and military support to authoritarian leader Alexander Lukashenko, who faced waves of popular protests. Moscow's reward was a pact signed late last year [to integrate the two countries](#) into a formal union, a major step forward in the Kremlin's long-held goal of exerting greater influence over Belarus.

Political upheaval in Kyrgyzstan—which has been the subject of competing interests from Moscow, Beijing and Washington since its independence in 1991—saw opposition parties in October 2020 try to wrest power from the pro-Russian leadership following allegations of voter fraud during parliamentary elections. The political upheaval continued for months but eventually landed in office a president who has agreed to maintain close ties with Russia.

[A Kremlin-brokered peace agreement](#) for Armenia and Azerbaijan in November 2020, following a conflict over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, cemented Moscow's leverage over both countries.

The Kremlin already has troops on the ground in the breakaway region of Transnistria, officially part of Moldova with which it fought a war in 1992 following the power vacuum left by the Soviet breakup. And concerns that terrorist organizations in Afghanistan that could infiltrate Tajikistan and cause insecurity across Central Asian states prompted Moscow to conduct joint military exercises on the Tajik-Afghan border last year.

“For Putin, it is almost paramount to ensure stability in the near abroad,” Mr. Hess said.

Ukraine and Kazakhstan hold special historical and strategic importance for Russia.

Mr. Putin repeatedly said he supports the redrawing of the boundaries of the late-19th-century Russian empire, which encompassed much of contemporary Kazakhstan and Ukraine.

“Modern Ukraine is entirely the brainchild of the Soviet era,” Mr. Putin wrote in a July treatise. “We know and remember that to a large extent it was created at the expense of historical Russia.”

When it was part of the Soviet Union, Ukraine boasted rich farmland that produced much of the wheat consumed in the U.S.S.R.

Its vast plains also acted as a buffer between the European powers and the Russian hinterland. Close historical, cultural and linguistic connections predating the rise of the Russian empire in the 18th century underscore Mr. Putin's belief that the nations are “two parts of one and the same people.”

He has also long cast doubt on Kazakhstan's autonomy, saying that Kazakhs “had never had statehood” and referring to the country as being an artificial state, invented by Nursultan Nazarbayev, who led

Kazakhstan for almost three decades before resigning in 2019 and designating Mr. Tokayev as his successor.

But now the crisis in Kazakhstan could offer an opportunity to plant a deeper stake in an important region, some political experts said.

What began as street demonstrations over fuel-price rises has spilled over to demands for economic and political change. After Kazakhstan's government resigned last Wednesday, protests continued to call for the ousting of Mr. Tokayev and the sidelining of Mr. Nazarbayev, who has wielded huge power in the country even after stepping aside.

Seeing political change forced from the street is unacceptable to Mr. Putin, who is loath to allow such dissent foment on Russia's doorstep, analysts said.

"In general, he is sensitive to any uprising of the people against the ruler," said Abbas Gallyamov, an independent political analyst based in Moscow. "He is afraid that this will inspire the Russian opposition."

The Russian-led forces supporting Mr. Tokayev's government are meant to guard critical facilities, airfields and key social infrastructure. But the presence of Russian troops in Kazakhstan could prove risky for Mr. Tokayev's leadership, analysts said.

"We are certainly in a quandary because if the Tokayev government is able to restore stability, and if it stays in power, it will be eternally grateful to the Russians," said Paul Stronski, former director for Russia and Central Asia on the National Security Council under President Barack Obama and now at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a Washington think tank.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters at a briefing Friday that "one lesson in recent history is that once Russians are in your house, it's sometimes very difficult to get them to leave."

The comment solicited an angry response from Russian foreign ministry officials, who on Saturday called them offensive.

"When Americans are in your house, it may be difficult to stay alive, not to be robbed or violated," Russia's foreign ministry said in a statement posted on its Telegram messenger channel.

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HEADLINE	01/10 Myanmar ousted leader 4yrs jail 2 nd verdict
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/myanmars-aung-san-su-kyi-sentenced-to-four-years-in-prison-in-second-verdict-11641796580?mod=lead_feature_below_a_pos1
GIST	<p>Myanmar's ousted leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, was sentenced to four years in prison after being found guilty of three charges, the most recent verdict in a number of criminal cases brought against her by the country's military junta that overthrew her government in a coup last year.</p> <p>Ms. Suu Kyi, 76 years old, has been detained since the military seized power on Feb. 1. She has since been hit with a dozen charges that could see her imprisoned for the rest of her life and is serving a two-year sentence after a conviction in early December.</p> <p>Lawyers for Ms. Suu Kyi, along with human-rights advocates, have said the charges are politically motivated and intended to keep Ms. Suu Kyi, who led her country's democracy movement, out of public life. Her trials have been held behind closed doors, and her legal team was banned by the junta from speaking to the press.</p> <p>A court in Myanmar convicted Ms. Suu Kyi on Monday on three charges, according to a person familiar with her case. The first two charges relate to allegations that she possessed illegally imported walkie-</p>

talkies at the time of her arrest. The third alleges that she broke pandemic-related restrictions on gatherings.

She was sentenced to two years' imprisonment under the country's import-export law and one year, to be served concurrently, under a telecommunications law, the person said. She was also sentenced to two years under a disaster-management law, bringing Monday's sentence to a total of four years, the person added.

On Dec. 6, Ms. Suu Kyi was sentenced to four years' imprisonment on charges of incitement and a separate charge of violating the disaster-management law, but her sentence was reduced to two years in a partial pardon by junta leader Gen. Min Aung Hlaing. She is serving her sentence at an undisclosed location, where she has been held since May.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken called her first conviction an affront to democracy and justice in the country and urged Myanmar authorities to release her and others who had been detained. The country's former President Win Myint and other officials from Ms. Suu Kyi's ousted civilian administration also remain imprisoned.

The military takeover triggered mass protests nationwide, which were met with deadly force. More than 1,400 people have been killed and over 11,000 arrested since the coup, according to the nonprofit Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which monitors fatalities and arrests in the country.

In recent months, many of the junta's opponents have joined an armed resistance movement. The military has intensified offensives against them, branding them as terrorists.

As the country's most prominent pro-democracy advocate, Ms. Suu Kyi has spent long periods detained by the military in the past. She was held under house arrest for about 15 years under previous regimes, and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 while still detained.

After she was freed, Ms. Suu Kyi led her political party, the National League for Democracy, to a landslide victory in the country's first free elections in a quarter-century in 2015. The party secured a second term with an even bigger win in elections held in 2020.

The military said it seized power because of widespread fraud, though independent monitors have said the polls were mostly free and fair with no major irregularities. The junta has since annulled the results and says it plans to hold new elections, which the opposition would likely boycott.

Ms. Suu Kyi's imprisonment leaves her political future uncertain, but activists and human-rights advocates say the coup ignited wider democratic opposition. "Fortunately for her and the future of Myanmar, the Myanmar people's movement has grown well beyond just the leadership of one woman, and one political party," said Phil Robertson, the deputy Asia director for Human Rights Watch.

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HEADLINE	01/07 WSF staff shortages predate pandemic
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/news/2022/01/staffing-shortages-washington-ferries-predicate-pandemic
GIST	<p>When Washington State Ferries canceled more than 50 sailings between Anacortes and the San Juan Islands in September, Ellyn Goodrich nearly missed her final radiation treatment.</p> <p>"The anxiety of it was really hard to manage," she recalled.</p> <p>Goodrich, an elementary school teacher and single parent who lives in Friday Harbor, has received chemotherapy and radiation as part of an experimental clinical trial after being diagnosed with liver cancer earlier in the year.</p>

Luckily, she did end up making it to Seattle, but only after booking a Kenmore Air seaplane flight that cost \$170 and then hiring an Uber — something Goodrich, as an immunocompromised person, wasn't eager to do during a pandemic.

The causes of the current crisis in the ferry system, part of the Washington State Department of Transportation, are various and complicated. Ever since the passage of Initiative 695 in 1999, which slashed revenue from car tabs, the state's ferry system has been chronically underfunded. Its fleet of boats is aging and in constant need of repair. In the decade between 2000 and 2010, not a single new ferry was built. And in December, the M.V. Tillikum, which was built in 1959 and serves the San Juans, where Goodrich lives, was pulled from service for electrical repairs.

As bad as the geriatric fleet is, the ferry system's dwindling workforce is its most troubling problem — and one that won't be fixed easily or quickly.

According to the latest figures from Washington State Ferries, 12% of its employees are currently eligible to retire, and within the next five years, 26% will be eligible. This attrition has been exacerbated by a pandemic, which has pushed other staff out the door. And replacing these skilled workers is no fast or simple matter for the ferry system.

"The biggest driver [in cancellations] right now really is the staffing issue," said Dale Bateman, who leads the Seattle Maritime Academy, a part of the Seattle College system and a common training ground for maritime staff in the state ferry system. "There aren't enough folks in some of the trained positions to fully staff the total number of runs that would normally be scheduled."

In addition to usual retirements, a significant number of ferry employees have either quit, retired or been fired because they refused to get COVID-10 vaccinations. According to Ian Sterling, a spokesperson for Washington State Ferries, 139 employees have left for COVID-related reasons. In the course of two years, ferry staffing levels have dropped from about 1,900 to 1,769.

Because many of these jobs are extremely specialized and require extensive training and Coast Guard certification, the prospect of quickly recruiting new crew members is especially daunting. Training for many positions can require up to 360 days of sea time, meaning at least two years of apprenticeship.

Route cancellations in the state ferry system have been rising since April of this year, but reached a peak this fall. In the first half of October, 341 runs were canceled because of crew shortages — an unprecedented number. Cancellations declined to 45 between mid-October to the end of November, but that's largely due to dramatic reductions in the number of scheduled runs, Sterling said.

The impacts for residents of the San Juans, who have no option other than private boats or flights to get on and off the island, have been immense.

Grocery stores shelves have been bare of even basic necessities such as bread and milk, said San Juan Island resident Meredith Griffith. Griffith, a cancer survivor with chronic medical issues, said she often has to wake her young children at 4 a.m. and sit in the car for long hours in the hopes of catching a rare ferry run to the mainland for medical appointments or groceries.

"Elderly and ill people in our community are forgoing needed medical care," Griffith said in an email, "rather than risk having to sleep in their cars in the bone-numbing, bitter winter cold."

Island businesses have also taken a hit. Andy Derksema, owner of a salmon fishing charter boat company based in Friday Harbor, said the uncertainty of ferry cancellations has caused a precipitous drop in the number of clients. "In the months between May and September we lost over \$10,000 in business," Derksema said. "It's a confidence issue for our customers. The whole ferry system is flawed."

In response to the ongoing crisis, state legislators from the 40th Legislative District, which includes the San Juan Islands and Anacortes, have created a ferry caucus to lobby for significant funding increases.

“The ferry system has not been a transportation priority in the last 20 years,” said 40th District Rep. Debra Lekanoff, a member of the caucus. Her coalition recently sent an open letter to Gov. Jay Inslee imploring him to adequately fund ferries. “If you don’t invest in your infrastructure, it’s going to fall apart,” she said. “You buy a house and don’t put the right gutters in, it’s gonna destroy everything down below.”

The governor seems to be getting the message. Inslee recently announced his 2021-2023 budget proposal, which includes an increase of about 5% in the portion of Washington State Ferries’ operating budget that includes staffing, said Jordan Kronen, a spokesperson for state Sen. Liz Lovelett, another member of the ferry caucus.

Inslee’s proposed 2021-2023 capital budget for Washington State Ferries represents a 26% increase (\$131 million), compared with the current two-year budget (\$505 million). If unspent money from the 2019-2021 biennium is added to that figure, Inslee’s ferry system capital budget represents a 44% boost to be spent on new ferries and terminals. This includes \$91 million that’s part of Inslee’s new climate agenda, which would pay for two additional electric hybrid ferries and terminal electrification.

Although state ferries get a significant subsidy from various tax revenues, the lion’s share of the system’s operating budget is covered by fares — of \$540 million in the proposed 2021-2023 operating budget, \$390 million, or 72%, comes from ticket sales. But both ridership and fare revenue have declined during the pandemic, in part because of cancellations. Sterling, the ferry spokesperson, said the pandemic has resulted in a loss of more than \$142 million in ticket sales since 2020.

As pressing as funding issues are, it’s clear the ferry system’s problems go back at least a decade, as state transportation officials and lawmakers have failed to train and replace the aging workforce.

Tim Saffle is a retired Washington State Ferry captain with 35 years of experience. He now leads the Pacific chapter of the International Organization of Masters, Mates & Pilots, the union that represents ferry deck officers. Saffle said ferry administrators have known about the impending aging workforce crisis since as early as 2008.

Prior to 2009, the ferry system hired 11 new deck officers on average each year through internal training programs, according to Saffle. After Washington State Ferries eviscerated funding for those training programs in 2009, that number plummeted. “We went through a five-year period after that where we only had five new mates total,” Saffle said.

In 2014, the union did a survey of its members. “We came up with a bell curve showing that the ferry system was going to peak out in about 2018 or 2019,” he said. “We told them we need to be training more people.”

The U.S. Coast Guard has strict requirements regarding the minimum number of crew members each vessel must have in order to sail. For instance, the Seattle-Bainbridge run generally requires, at a minimum, a captain, two mates, four able seamen and a chief engineer, among others. With crews on most runs at a bare minimum, it sometimes takes only one person calling in sick to force a cancellation. Add to that an aging and inefficient on-call and dispatch system and ferries are often without the necessary staff. Throw a pandemic into the mix, and you have a perfect storm.

“There was already a significant systemic stressor on the system, and WSF was kind of muddling through,” said Bateman of the Seattle Maritime Academy. “COVID significantly exacerbated that, but it also kind of masked it because there were few people sailing.”

The problem of crew shortages and cancellations isn’t limited to Washington State Ferries. Across the globe, the maritime industry is confronting an aging and shrinking workforce that has intensified during the pandemic. Saffle said the Alaska Marine Highway system and BC Ferries are also struggling with labor shortages that aren’t expected to improve any time soon.

The retirement crisis is most alarming in the senior ranks at Washington State Ferries. “For our most senior deck officers and senior engine room staff [the number eligible for retirement] is sometimes as high as 50% or more,” Sterling said. Bateman noted that the average age of mates and senior staff in Washington State Ferries is 55.

Internal staffing policies haven’t helped the ferry system, Bateman said. In addition to having minimal funding for internal training and recruiting, the on-call and apprenticeship programs discourage the deckhands who park cars and clean bathrooms from wanting to advance into the upper ranks because those who want to train for those higher level positions must revert to on-call status.

“In many cases, if I want to advance I’m dropping to on-call from a fairly senior status as an AB [able-bodied seaman] making decent money with a fairly routine schedule,” Bateman said. “Because I’m senior in the union I get control over the routes I’m working. But if I become a mate.... My life suddenly gets upended.”

Patty Rubstello, who was appointed to her position as assistant secretary of the Washington State Ferries in 2020, said the agency is looking at changes to this system. “There’s a lot of dedication within the ferries that want to provide quality, reliable service, but sometimes there are things that are out of our control,” said Rubstello. She noted that the ferry system is working to fix the on-call practice, recognizing that its unpredictable nature makes it unworkable for many of its employees.

Rubstello wouldn’t commit, however, to a timeline for those changes. She also said the agency hopes to ramp up recruitment efforts at national maritime academies and to diversify its pool of applicants. But she also didn’t offer a timeline for meeting the system’s diversity goals.

Rubstello said Washington State Ferries seeks to ramp up staffing on boats above Coast Guard limits, but added that without significant budget increases in the upcoming legislative session, this will prove difficult. “That would require more than the Legislature has given us in the past,” she said.

Sterling, the ferry system spokesperson, said one systemic improvement that has made is switching to year-round recruitment and hiring. Traditionally, the ferry system hired only before the busy summer season. “There are ferry jobs to apply for right now,” he said. “That’s not something that was the case pre-pandemic.”

Schools such as the Seattle Maritime Academy offer a quicker route to these highly specialized positions, said Bateman. The academy’s training programs for deck crews and engineers take about nine months of classroom instruction and hands-on training, and this can reduce the required sea time working on state ferries to about 90 days in some cases.

Unfortunately, apprenticeship programs within the ferry system are poorly paid, offering just a \$50 to \$75 daily stipend, Bateman said. Upping that pay or increasing scholarships for maritime schools in the state could help. Currently, the Seattle Maritime Academy graduates about a dozen students each in its deck and engineering programs each year, although it has capacity for 18 in each program and could ramp up to about twice that number if more funding were available.

To encourage more young people living in San Juan County to seek maritime careers, the San Juan Island Economic Development Council this year launched a program that helps prepare students for Coast Guard exams for pursuing general maritime careers, as well as assisting with transportation to maritime programs at Skagit Valley College on the mainland.

“It’s a super grassroots, nitty-gritty effort,” said executive director Victoria Compton. “If we need to do a bake sale to support it, we will.”

For Lisa Coley, who lives on Vashon Island, ferry cancellations have thrown her work life into chaos. A clinical social worker who contracts at six different hospitals in Kitsap County and Tacoma, Coley has had

	<p>to dramatically reduce her hours because of erratic ferry service. “For the people who commute to Tacoma, it’s causing true hardship,” Coley said. “It’s not just an inconvenience.”</p> <p>Because Vashon is served by two ferry runs, the agency has sometimes canceled a complete day of sailings between Point-Defiance and Tacoma, arguing that the island still has the other “triangle run” connecting Southworth and West Seattle. Coley said those Tacoma cancellations have sometimes left her teenage son, who attends high school in Tacoma, stranded on the other side. Fortunately, he has friends he can stay with, but Coley is fed up. She is considering buying a house on the mainland after 14 years on the island.</p> <p>“I’ve attended all the meetings when they had them on the island,” Coley said. “But you get burned out over time because nothing ever changes. ... It actually gets worse.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 US, Russia meet for talks amid tensions
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/us-russia-meet-for-talks-amid-tensions-linked-to-ukraine/
GIST	<p>GENEVA (AP) — Senior U.S. and Russian officials were formally launching special talks on strategic stability on Monday as part of a flurry of diplomatic activity in Europe this week aimed at defusing tensions over a Russian military buildup on the border with Ukraine.</p> <p>Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov and his delegation arrived under Swiss police escort at the U.S. diplomatic mission for face-to-face talks with Wendy Sherman, the U.S. deputy secretary of state, and her team. The meeting is part of “Strategic Security Dialogue” talks launched by Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin during a June summit in the Swiss city.</p> <p>After an informal working dinner on Sunday, Ryabkov predicted “difficult” talks in Geneva that are to be followed by a NATO-Russia meeting in Brussels on Wednesday and a meeting of the multilateral Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in Vienna on Thursday.</p> <p>Moscow has sought to wrest a string of concessions from the U.S. and its Western allies, including guarantees that NATO will no longer expand eastward into former Soviet states like Ukraine, along whose border Russia has amassed an estimated 100,000 troops in steps that have raised concerns about a possible deeper military intervention there.</p> <p>State Department spokesman Ned Price said that during Sunday’s dinner Sherman “stressed the United States’ commitment to the international principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and the freedom of sovereign nations to choose their own alliances,” a reference to Ukraine and its aspirations of joining NATO.</p> <p>Sherman “affirmed that the United States would welcome genuine progress through diplomacy,” Price said in a statement.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 CDC faces fresh blowback on messaging
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/09/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#as-omicron-spikes-the-cdc-seeks-to-clarify-its-message-on-testing-and-isolation
GIST	<p>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention faced fresh blowback on Sunday for its muddled messaging on the agency’s new isolation and quarantine guidance.</p> <p>The C.D.C.’s new guidelines, released on Dec. 27, say that people infected with the coronavirus can end isolation, in most cases, after five days instead of 10 and do not need a negative result on a virus test to do so. But some experts have said that five days might be too short, and that letting people mingle with others before first testing negative was risky.</p>

On Sunday, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the agency's director, fielded questions about her decision to drop the testing requirement, and maintained that antigen tests are less sensitive to the Omicron variant, which is surging across the United States, than to previous versions of the virus.

"We have ever-evolving science with an ever-evolving variant, and my job is to provide updated guidance in the context of rapidly rising cases," she told "Fox News Sunday."

But other experts disagreed with that assessment, saying antigen tests, while flawed, only missed Omicron cases [very early in the course of infection](#).

"I think they are a bedrock of our long-term strategy for managing this virus," Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of the Brown University School of Public Health, said on ABC's "This Week."

The debate on testing reflects broader disagreement over [how best to cope with a virus that seems here to stay](#). With only about 63 percent of the population fully vaccinated, the virus could seed large outbreaks and overwhelm hospitals for the foreseeable future.

On Thursday, six prominent health experts who advised President Biden's transition team [called for a new strategy](#) to help Americans live with the virus long-term. Among the recommendations: easy access to affordable tests, more aggressive use of vaccine mandates, "comprehensive, digital, real-time" data collection by the C.D.C. and faster development of vaccines and treatments.

The Supreme Court seemed [unlikely on Friday](#) to allow a cornerstone of the Biden administration's plan to fight the virus. While the court may greenlight a vaccine mandate for health care workers at facilities that receive federal funding, it seemed skeptical of the legal basis for a broader mandate that would affect 84 million American workers.

That mandate would compel all companies with 100 or more employees to require either vaccinations or weekly testing and masks.

"The Supreme Court has to recognize that Covid in the workplace is a real health threat," said Dr. Zeke Emanuel, one of the authors of the proposed pandemic strategy and a medical ethicist at the University of Pennsylvania. Vaccine mandates are the best protection against the virus, particularly for frontline workers, he said.

"For the Supreme Court to take that away in the midst of an emergency seems to me to be very wrong," he added.

Dr. Walensky did not respond to a question about the utility of a vaccine mandate but noted that unvaccinated children and adults are at significantly higher risk from the virus than people who are fully vaccinated and boosted.

In children 4 years old and younger, who are not yet eligible for vaccination, hospitalizations are [at the highest levels](#) since the beginning of the pandemic, the C.D.C. reported on Friday.

"The vast majority of children who are in the hospital are unvaccinated," Dr. Walensky said on Sunday. "And for those children who are not eligible for vaccination, we do know that they are most likely to get sick with Covid if their family members aren't vaccinated."

Omicron is milder than previous variants, and even young children seem less likely to need ventilators than those admitted during previous surges, doctors have said.

Dr. Walensky also clarified confusion over the number of children hospitalized with Covid. On Friday, Justice Sonia Sotomayor mistakenly said that 100,000 children with Covid had been admitted to hospitals nationwide. The real number is closer to 3,500, Dr. Walensky said.

	“While pediatric hospitalizations are rising, they’re still about 15-fold less than hospitalizations of older age demographics,” she added.
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HEADLINE	01/09 CDC: some at-risk eligible 4th Covid shot
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/09/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#immunocompromised-fourth-dose-booster
GIST	<p>Some people with a weakened immune system can get a fourth dose of the coronavirus vaccine as early as this coming week, according to recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that were updated last week.</p> <p>The C.D.C. endorsed a third dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines for moderately or severely immunocompromised people on Aug. 13, but said this would be considered a part of the primary immunization, not a booster shot.</p> <p>In October, the agency said those immunocompromised people could receive a booster shot — a fourth dose of vaccine, six months after their third dose. These guidelines were consistent with its recommendation for other adults.</p> <p>Last week, hoping to stem the surge of infections with the highly contagious Omicron variant, the C.D.C. shortened that interval to five months for a booster shot for Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna recipients.</p> <p>For immunocompromised people who received a single shot of the coronavirus vaccine made by Johnson & Johnson, the C.D.C. does not recommend additional primary doses, but advises that they get a booster shot of the Moderna or Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines two months after the first dose.</p> <p>Some people are born with absent or faulty immune systems, and in others, treatments for some diseases like cancer diminish the potency of immune defenses. The C.D.C. estimates there are about seven million immunocompromised individuals in the country.</p> <p>Many of them produce few to no antibodies in response to a vaccine or an infection, leaving them susceptible to the virus. When they do become infected, they may suffer prolonged illness, with death rates as high as 55 percent.</p> <p>It is unclear what proportion of those people are protected by additional doses. Still, with the Omicron variant surging in the country, some immunocompromised people sought out fourth or even fifth shots of the vaccines even before the C.D.C. changed its guidelines. While receiving multiple doses of vaccines in a short period is unlikely to be harmful, it may produce diminishing returns, according to some experts.</p> <p>The C.D.C. has said that any American 12 and older can receive a Pfizer-BioNTech booster — those 18 and older can alternatively receive a Moderna booster — five months after completing their initial shots with those vaccines. Israel has already begun offering fourth doses to high-risk groups including older adults. But the Biden administration has not yet said whether it plans to follow suit.</p> <p>When asked on Friday about the possibility of a fourth shot for the general population, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the C.D.C., said that focus remained on Americans eligible for their third shots.</p> <p>She added that U.S. officials remained in close touch with Israel experts about their data. “We will be following our own data carefully as well, to see how these boosters are working in terms of waning effectiveness, not just for infection but, importantly, for severe disease,” she said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Russia warns US over Ukraine
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SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/09/world/europe/russia-ukraine-us-geneva.html
GIST	<p>GENEVA — Russian and American officials met for a preliminary dinner on Sunday night to begin a high-stakes negotiation over threats to Ukraine and a widening gulf between Moscow and the West, but there was deep pessimism on both sides that a diplomatic solution was within reach.</p> <p>Even before they sat down, the senior Russian official dispatched to the talks warned that the United States had a “lack of understanding” of the Kremlin’s security demands, and the United States voiced doubts over whether Russia was “serious” about de-escalating the Ukraine crisis.</p> <p>The comments by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei A. Ryabkov maintained the hard-line rhetoric that some analysts and Western officials see as a possible prelude to new Russian military action against Ukraine. He appeared to be trying to lower expectations for a pathway to an agreement just hours before he opened the session with a private dinner in a residential building on the Geneva lakefront with Wendy Sherman, the deputy secretary of state. The two will meet again in Geneva on Monday, leading Russian and American delegations in more formal negotiations.</p> <p>In remarks reported by Russian news agencies, Mr. Ryabkov said he was intent on negotiating “dynamically, without pauses,” to prevent the West from “putting the brakes on all this and burying it in endless discussions.”</p> <p>Mr. Ryabkov’s comments came several hours before Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, appearing on several Sunday morning television programs, said he thought there was room for negotiation in the talks taking place in the coming days in Geneva and two other European cities.</p> <p>While he ruled out encroachments on Ukraine’s territorial integrity and reductions in American troop levels, he opened the door to a possible revival of a treaty abandoned by the Trump administration and to mutual limits on where troops could be deployed and exercises conducted.</p> <p>The negotiations, Mr. Blinken insisted, are “not about making concessions” under the threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, eight years after it annexed Crimea.</p> <p>“It’s about seeing whether, in the context of dialogue and diplomacy, there are things that both sides, all sides can do to reduce tensions,” he said on CNN. “We’ve done that in the past.”</p> <p>Several times on Sunday, Mr. Blinken raised the possibility of reviving the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, which banned the deployment, in Europe or in Russia, of medium-range nuclear missiles. Both the Obama and Trump administrations accused Moscow of violating the accord, and the United States left the treaty in 2019.</p> <p>“There may be ground for renewing that,” he said on ABC’s “This Week.”</p> <p>And Mr. Blinken raised the idea of revising an agreement on the deployment of conventional forces in Europe that could keep military exercises far from borders — and thus reduce the fear that an exercise could become the leaping-off point for an invasion. “Those are certainly things that can be revisited if — if Russia is serious about doing it,” he said.</p> <p>The Russians were incensed this fall when the United States and allied NATO forces conducted exercises in the Black Sea, near the Ukrainian and Russian coasts.</p> <p>Privately, American officials have little hope that President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia would be satisfied with agreements that restore the status quo of a few years ago. And their concern is that the Russians will emerge from the Geneva talks, and others this week in Brussels and Vienna, declaring that diplomacy has failed — and that Mr. Putin will attempt to seize more of Eastern Ukraine, or carry out cyber or other attacks to cripple the government in Kyiv.</p>

Mr. Blinken's appeared intent on showing an openness to a range of diplomatic solutions while stressing that if Russia rejects that path, "massive consequences" would follow. They would go far beyond the penalties the United States and its allies imposed after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the subsequent American sanctions for Russian election interference in 2016 and the Solar Winds cyberattacks on American companies and the federal government in 2020.

American officials have detailed those consequences in recent days, describing the kind of financial, technology and military sanctions that would go into effect if Russia begins an invasion of parts or all of the country.

The State Department said that on Monday it would take up "certain bilateral issues" with Russia, "but will not discuss European security without our European partners and allies."

Russia is seeking what it calls "security guarantees" from the United States and the NATO alliance that would essentially grant the country the kind of sphere of influence it has not enjoyed for more than 30 years, including Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries in Eastern Europe. The Kremlin has been backing up those demands by massing tens of thousands of troops and equipment near its border with Ukraine, signaling that it is prepared to use force if diplomacy fails.

While Mr. Blinken attempted to focus the discussion on missile basing and military exercises in the region, Mr. Ryabkov said that Russia's aims in the talks would go well beyond arms-control issues. Signals sent by American officials ahead of the talks, he said, "reflect a lack of understanding of what we need," according to the RIA Novosti news agency.

Mr. Ryabkov said that Russia would seek to revise the relationship with the West that was put in place with the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997. That agreement was followed by countries in the former Soviet sphere of influence joining the Western alliance, and many in Moscow see it as having disregarded Russia's security interests in Europe.

"We need to assure the curtailing of the destructive NATO activities that have been taking place for decades and bring NATO back to positions that are essentially equivalent to what was the case in 1997," Mr. Ryabkov said, according to the Interfax news agency. "But it is precisely on these issues that we hear least of all any readiness on the part of the American side and NATO to come to an agreement."

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HEADLINE	01/09 HR departments now focus on public health
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/09/business/human-resources-pandemic-vaccines.html
GIST	<p>Gia Ganesh is a people person, so she loved running people operations — what many companies now call human resources — at Florence Healthcare. She led the health care technology company's recruitment efforts, met with expecting moms planning for maternity leave and helped staff decide whether to spend their wellness benefits on therapy or a massage.</p> <p>But like many working people, she found that the pandemic broke open her job description and filled it with new responsibilities. And like many human resources professionals, she found that she sometimes had to play a role akin to company nurse.</p> <p>As Covid first started to spread, Ms. Ganesh made sure employees had stipends to set up work spaces at home and planned virtual activities, like a magic show and a cooking competition, to keep people connected. By last fall, she was in the meeting with the chief executive writing up her company's vaccine mandate, which requires that all employees, even those working remotely, be fully vaccinated against the coronavirus. She reviews every request for a vaccine rule exemption from people who would rather submit to regular coronavirus testing.</p> <p>"What happens if employees test positive for Covid? How do we take care of them, and the role, if they're out for a significant period of time? There's a lot of new complexity that Covid has brought to the world of H.R.," said Ms. Ganesh, whose company has about 150 employees globally.</p>

Just as the Covid-19 crisis made amateur epidemiologists of people trying to go about their daily lives, it also forced H.R. professionals, especially those at small and midsize businesses, into a new focus on public health. As companies weighed when to return to the office, whether to require coronavirus vaccines and what sort of exemptions from those rules to allow, it was often H.R. directors who were asked to lead those efforts. It was no longer sufficient for these professionals to manage the job satisfaction and career development of their colleagues. Suddenly, they were also charged with monitoring their health, safety and views on immunization.

The added dimensions of H.R. jobs are coming into sharper focus now, as more organizations put [vaccine mandates](#) into effect. About 17 percent of American employers were requiring vaccinations or negative Covid tests for employees returning to the office, according to a Gallagher survey of more than 500 employers conducted between August and October.

Hovering over company conversations about vaccines is the additional consideration of whether to mandate booster shots. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has not updated its definition of “fully vaccinated” [but said](#) that being “up to date” on vaccination includes a booster. And some state and local leaders like Gov. Kathy Hochul of New York have indicated that they plan to include a booster requirement as well.

Then there’s the tug of war over return to office plans, with the pull of executives eager to see workers in person meeting the push of soaring Covid case counts. On top of that has come the challenge of retaining talent when workers are walking off the job, with 4.5 million leaving their roles voluntarily in November. The sources of stress, for some H.R. directors, seem to multiply by the month.

For George Boué, who ran H.R. at Stiles, a commercial real estate company based in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., the anxieties of his job began to increase this fall. He kept jerking awake at 3 a.m., his mind racing with questions. How was he going to roll out a vaccine mandate to his colleagues who viewed it as an intrusion? More important, how was he going to keep everybody in his office safe?

Mr. Boué, who is fully vaccinated, was surrounded by friends in South Florida who were citing misinformation about the vaccine. He estimated that one-third of his 300-person staff is most likely not fully vaccinated. When the Labor Department rolled out its vaccine rule in November, requiring large businesses to get their workers vaccinated or tested weekly, Mr. Boué started drafting the terms for his company’s vaccine policy; then he put it on hold because of legal battles over the mandates, especially in Florida. Mr. Boué decided that among teammates he wouldn’t refer to the policy as a mandate, because he wanted to temper tensions whenever he could.

“There’s those that are feeling the world is coming to an end, and this is horrible, and those on the other side of the spectrum that feel this is all a bunch of baloney,” he said. “The toughest part of my role has been trying to address all sides.”

His responsibilities continued to grow thornier since the start of the pandemic: In the early months, his team had to order gallons of disinfectant and hundreds of masks. Last summer, they had to start enforcing mask requirements in the office for unvaccinated employees, though his team did not ask for proof of vaccination for that rule and instead went by “the trust factor.”

Some executives are outsourcing Covid safety work to companies that set up turnkey vaccine and testing systems. DocGo, for example, a health care and technology company, creates testing programs for businesses and monitors the maintenance of employee confidentiality, data privacy and compliance with federal government standards.

Still, Anthony Capone, DocGo’s president, said he hears regularly from H.R. directors, especially those worried that their unvaccinated workers will struggle to obtain Covid tests, which could mean employers are in violation of government guidelines.

H.R. professionals said they're trying, wherever possible, to point toward government rules and to emphasize to employees that they're simply following advice from public health authorities.

"I try not to be a doctor or a scientist," said Amy Zimmerman, the chief people officer of Relay Payments, a software company based in Atlanta with just over 100 employees. "We've got institutions like the World Health Organization and the C.D.C. and really smart people who are making decisions that if you're reasonable, you trust."

Still, there are plenty of scientific decisions — especially those on vaccine rule exemptions — that have to be made on a case-by-case basis, and they tend to fall to an H.R. team that doesn't have scientific training.

Ms. Zimmerman's company currently allows its staff to work from home, but those coming into the office have to show proof of full vaccination. The requests for exemptions from that rule go straight to H.R. One involved concerns about fertility treatments, but the employee could not get a supporting doctor's note and now cannot come into the office. Another was from an employee who had been previously infected with coronavirus, who Ms. Zimmerman's team determined would have to show proof of antibodies every 90 days.

Relay Payments also had two large in-person gatherings last year, where it required both proof of vaccination and a negative test 72 hours before arrival. Right before its December gathering, an employee who was fully vaccinated tested positive and skipped the event. Ms. Zimmerman was relieved that he caught the case before his flight from home, which she viewed as validation of the company's move to require both vaccines and testing.

Now her team is weighing whether to mandate boosters. She said they might hold off on for now, though they would continue to follow C.D.C. recommendations.

Making these kinds of decisions demands constant consumption of news by business leaders, with many seeking out online expertise about Covid: "The C.D.C. is my main source, but there's multiple channels and mediums I'm plugged into," said Ms. Ganesh, at Florence Healthcare.

Mr. Boué, in South Florida, has finally hit his limit on H.R. angst. He retired at the end of last year. His wife works at a hospital, and with the anxieties she carries — about freezer trucks and overflowing beds — he feels he can't take home his own set of work worries.

Mr. Boué used to wake up raring to get to the office: "Even though I'm antisocial, I do enjoy working and helping people out," he said. But the last two years have undercut that sense of enthusiasm: "There wasn't a particular 'Aha!' moment," he added. "I just realized the stress wasn't good for me."

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HEADLINE	01/09 Noncitizens gain right to vote in NYC
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/09/nyregion/noncitizens-nyc-voting-rights.html
GIST	<p>Mayor Eric Adams, setting aside prior misgivings, allowed a bill that would grant more than 800,000 noncitizens the right to vote in municipal elections to become law on Sunday.</p> <p>"I believe that New Yorkers should have a say in their government, which is why I have and will continue to support this important legislation," the mayor said in a statement.</p> <p>"I look forward to bringing millions more into the democratic process," he added.</p> <p>The measure applies to legal residents, including those with green cards and so-called Dreamers who were brought to the country illegally as children but were allowed to remain under a federal program known as DACA. Although the City Council approved the bill last month, New York law provides the mayor the opportunity to veto it within 30 days. Without any action, the bill passes into law automatically, as happened with this measure.</p>

An estimated 808,000 adults will be eligible to vote beginning Jan. 9, 2023, according to the City Council. They will be able to vote in primary and general elections for citywide contests, like those for mayor and public advocate, as well as in local races, like those for council members and borough presidents. The law does not allow noncitizens to vote in state or federal elections.

New York is not the first city to implement such a measure — similar policies exist in Vermont and [Maryland](#), and are under consideration in Illinois, Maine and Massachusetts — but it is the largest to do so.

The measure stands in sharp contrast to other efforts nationwide to limit the right to vote. In August, [Texas passed](#) a bill limiting the use of absentee voting and drop boxes, and empowering partisan poll watchers. That measure has [been challenged](#) by the Justice Department, which contended that the law disenfranchised older, disabled and non-English-speaking voters.

Mr. Adams’s hesitation over the bill concerned the clause allowing noncitizens to vote after 30 consecutive days in the city — a period he worried might be too short. But he said he changed his mind after consulting with colleagues.

“After hearing their rationale and their theories behind it, I thought it was more important to not veto the bill, or get in the way at all,” he told Jake Tapper on CNN’s “State of the Union.”

Former Councilman Ydanis Rodriguez, who sponsored the measure and has since been nominated by Mr. Adams to serve as transportation commissioner, [praised the mayor](#) on Twitter, saying it was “no surprise” that he backed the bill.

“Eric has shown once again his relentless commitment to our immigrant communities,” he said.

Opponents of the measure argued that it could discourage immigrants from seeking citizenship, and might not be constitutional. The Republican National Committee [filed suit](#) against two Vermont cities in September over similar voting expansions, saying they violated that state’s Constitution.

The residency requirement in the New York City bill mirrors the voting law in New York State, which requires one to reside in the county, village or state where they are registered for at least 30 days before casting a vote.

Murad Awawdeh, the executive director of the New York Immigrant Coalition, an umbrella organization representing hundreds of immigrant and refugee groups, cheered the bill as “the largest expansion to our democracy in the past century.”

“Immigrant New Yorkers will have the opportunity to be a part of the process and will no longer be rendered invisible,” he said.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Record rain, snow closes WA state roads
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/09/us/seattle-record-snow-flooding.html
GIST	<p>Emergency workers in the Seattle area were assessing the damage on Sunday after torrential rain and heavy snowfall hit a large part of the region, making Washington’s largest city a virtual island. Seattle recorded two inches of rain on Thursday, its seventh-wettest January day on record, and last week ranked No. 5 on Seattle’s list of its wettest first week of January.</p> <p>Hoquiam, on the western edge of the state; Olympia; and Quillayute, in Washington’s northwest corner, also saw some of their wettest days on record. Hoquiam on Thursday received about six inches of rain, its highest one-day total on record, and Rainier, southwest of Olympia, had 10 inches of rain, according to the National Weather Service.</p>

Warning of “imminent flooding,” officials in the Skokomish Valley area, west of Seattle, on Thursday [ordered residents to either evacuate or prepare to shelter](#) in place for 72 hours.

Clearer skies came on Sunday, but some important roads remained closed. The Washington Emergency Management Division urged drivers to stay off [closed roads](#), saying on Twitter late Saturday that “first responders continue rescuing people ignoring closed road signs.”

Other parts of the state also saw closures. Crucial routes that cut through the Cascade Mountains and connect the east and west sides of the state were closed for days because of heavy snowfall: Snoqualmie Pass, the main route through the mountains, was expected to reopen on Sunday, [according to the state’s Department of Transportation](#). Blewett Pass was also set to reopen for freight travel, but Stevens and White Passes will take longer to clear, the agency said. It has been [over a decade since all four passes were closed](#) for an extended time, the agency said.

The road crew on Stevens Pass said on Sunday that there was a [four-inch-thick “slab of ice”](#) on the lanes that were cleared of snow.

The Pullman campus of Washington State University, in southeastern Washington, [canceled classes](#) on Monday and Tuesday to allow students on the other side of the state to return.

Areas in Central Washington, including Leavenworth, got around three feet of snow on Thursday and Friday, with some pockets getting four feet, which the city described as record-breaking in a statement. The mayor of Leavenworth on Friday [declared a state of emergency and called in the National Guard](#).

The heavy snow and rain raised concerns of avalanches in the Cascade Mountains. The Seattle Fire Department shared a video on Twitter of a house that had slid off its foundation. Both people inside the house were rescued, but a pet dog was killed, the department said.

A 72-year-old man in Grays Harbor County, in the northwest part of the state, died in a torrential downpour on Friday after leaving to move his car to higher ground, [according to The Associated Press](#). In Lewis County, in southwestern Washington, home to Chehalis, the water was receding on Sunday, but “we definitely still have flooding,” said Austin Majors, public information specialist for the county. In that county alone, there had been at least 25 water rescues, he said.

Thousands in the state were without power on Friday and Saturday, but most outages appeared to have been resolved. Gov. Jay Inslee issued an emergency declaration on Friday that cited “hazardous driving conditions, flooding and extended road closures.”

Meteorologists attributed the weather to a warm front that had hovered above the area for an extended period, bringing with it several inches of rain.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Race as critical qualifier medical treatment
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/9/democrat-run-states-cities-using-race-based-system/
GIST	<p>Several Democratic-run states and cities are giving preference to non-White patients for receiving potentially lifesaving treatments for COVID-19, a race-based scheme that legal scholars say is unconstitutional.</p> <p>Minnesota and New York City are among the latest jurisdictions where health officials are giving priority to people of color for scarce monoclonal antibodies, which can prevent COVID-19 patients from developing severe illness.</p>

In Minnesota, the state health department is using a scoring system that awards points to patients with certain risk factors, such as chronic kidney disease and diabetes. The department's scoring also gives two points to people with "BIPOC" status — Black, Indigenous or people of color.

White people who have the same risk factors are not given the same priority ranking for the antibody treatments as non-White people with COVID-19. Legal analysts say the approach likely wouldn't stand up in court.

"It's very open to constitutional challenge and hard to defend from the state's point of view," said Walter Olson, a specialist on constitutional law and public policy at the Cato Institute. "The equal protection clause is at its strictest when it comes to explicit racial classifications made by government in dispensing rights."

Inside the Beltway: Midterm election cycle 'truly underway'

Eugene Volokh, a law school professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, called the schemes unconstitutional.

"Use of race as a proxy for supposed greater risk — instead of focusing on the more directly relevant factors ('race-neutral alternatives,' in doctrinal terms), such as underlying medical conditions, vaccination status, lack of access to good alternative care or the like — would violate the Equal Protection Clause in this situation," Mr. Volokh wrote in Reason magazine. "If the [Health] Department is concerned about underdiagnosis of health conditions, it could certainly provide funds to make sure that eligible patients are properly diagnosed; but it can't just use being non-white or Hispanic as a stand-in for such supposed underdiagnosis."

In New York, the state health department issued a memo on Dec. 27 stating that non-Hispanic Whites with COVID-19 can get oral antivirals only if they have medical conditions or unspecified "other factors that increase their risk for severe illness." Sick non-White and Hispanic people don't face the same requirements to qualify for the treatment.

Citing disparities of access to the health care system, the department said race can be used as a critical qualifier.

"Non-white race or Hispanic/Latino ethnicity should be considered a risk factor, as longstanding systemic health and social inequities have contributed to an increased risk of severe illness and death from COVID-19," the memo stated.

White people with COVID-19 can receive monoclonal antibody treatments, but only if they show medical conditions that increase their risk for severe illness. Non-White patients in New York are automatically eligible for the treatments.

In September, the Biden administration imposed limits on access to antibody treatments as demand increased, primarily in seven Southern states. Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves, a Republican, said last week that his state is facing a shortage of monoclonal antibodies to treat those infected with the delta variant of the coronavirus, and he accused the Biden administration of refusing to help.

"We need more testing from the federal government. We need more monoclonal antibodies allocations from the federal government," Mr. Reeves said. "And that's what we've been begging them to send us, much to no avail, for the last 10 days."

New York City also has said it will take a patient's race into account when distributing potentially lifesaving COVID-19 treatments. The Department of Health and Mental Hygiene said on its website last month that the city will "consider race and ethnicity when assessing individual risk." It said "longstanding systemic health and social inequities" can increase the risk of death from COVID-19.

The guidance applies to the distribution of monoclonal antibodies and oral antivirals such as Paxlovid and molnupiravir, the New York Post reported.

“New Yorkers of color have borne the brunt of this pandemic due to structural racism and the legacy of disinvestment in many minority communities,” city health department spokesman Michael Lanza told the Post. “Doctors are advised to consider the disproportionate impact felt by these communities in addition to systemic health disparities when prescribing treatments for people who are at highest risk for severe COVID-19 outcomes.”

The paper also cited an unidentified physician from Staten Island who complained that a pharmacist asked about the race of two of his patients before filling Paxlovid prescriptions for them. Both patients, who were White, did receive the treatments.

Andrew Giuliani, a Republican candidate for governor of New York, said the race-based policy in a Democratic-controlled city and state is “a politically motivated narrative.”

“They are not treating everybody equally,” Mr. Giuliani said in an interview. “This should be based off of risk factors. It should be based off of age, and if someone is immunocompromised, or obesity levels. The fact that they’re taking race as a primary factor in this, I think is absolutely absurd.”

Vermont Gov. Phil Scott, a Republican, announced in April that anyone 16 or older who identified as Black, Indigenous or a person of color (BIPOC) could get a COVID-19 vaccine.

State Health Commissioner Mark Levine said at the time that people of color were prioritized for the vaccine because of their higher rates of COVID-19 and lower rates of vaccination.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in a Nov. 30 memo that the COVID-19 pandemic “has brought social and racial injustice and inequity to the forefront of public health.”

“It has highlighted that health equity is still not a reality as COVID-19 has unequally affected many racial and ethnic minority groups, putting them more at risk of getting sick and dying from COVID-19,” the agency said. “The term ‘racial and ethnic minority groups’ includes people of color with a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences. Negative experiences are common to many people within these groups, and some social determinants of health have historically prevented them from having fair opportunities for economic, physical, and emotional health. Social determinants of health are the conditions in the places where people live, learn, work, play, and worship that affect a wide range of health risks and outcomes.”

CDC data shows that the vaccination rates of Black and Hispanic people are lower than for Whites. The agency said 58% of White people have received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose, compared with 56% of Hispanic people and 51% of Black people. Critics say vaccination status, not race, should be the determining factor in treatments.

The controversy is not limited to blue states. In November, Republican gubernatorial candidate Don Huffines accused Texas agencies under the administration of Republican Gov. Greg Abbott of discriminating against White and Asian Americans who need monoclonal antibodies.

“If I was governor, we would not be allowing these racist policies in Texas,” Mr. Huffines said in a statement. “Policies that discriminate against Texans will immediately cease when I am governor.”

Texas officials deny using any race-based policy in delivering COVID-19 treatments. Chris Van Deusen, a spokesperson for the Texas Department of State Health Services, told USA Today in November that any person of any race with a doctor’s prescription is eligible to receive monoclonal antibody treatment.

	<p>Mr. Abbott, who was treated with Regeneron's monoclonal antibodies in August after testing positive for COVID-19, announced on Dec. 31 that Texas had requested more federally supported testing locations and medical personnel and "additional federal allocations of monoclonal antibodies."</p> <p>"Detecting COVID-19 and preventing COVID-related hospitalizations are critical to our fight against this virus," Mr. Abbott said in a statement. "While the Biden administration has cut supplies of monoclonal antibody treatments and testing kits when they are needed most, the state of Texas is urging the federal government to step up in this fight and provide the resources necessary to help protect Texans. Testing sites, additional medical staff, and continued shipments of therapeutics from the federal government will help us continue to save lives and mitigate the spread of COVID-19."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Prague: thousands rally anti-vax mandate
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/9/thousands-rally-in-prague-against-vaccination-mand/
GIST	<p>Thousands of people marched through the Czech Republic's capital on Sunday to protest against compulsory COVID-19 vaccination for certain groups and professions.</p> <p>The protesters gathered at Wenceslas Square in central Prague to question the effectiveness of the current vaccines and reject the vaccination of children before marching through the capital, chanting "Freedom, freedom."</p> <p>Prague's protest followed similar but smaller demonstrations in several Czech cities on Saturday.</p> <p>The previous government released an order in early December, making vaccination mandatory for the 60 and over age group, as well as medical personnel, police officers, firefighters and medical students.</p> <p>The order is due to take effect in March, but it still might end up being overturned.</p> <p>Prime Minister Andrej Babis' administration was replaced later in December by a new government formed by five parties that won October's parliamentary election, led by Prime Minister Petr Fiala.</p> <p>The new administration opposed a vaccination mandate for older people and was ready to cancel it, but didn't rule out it might still be compulsory for some, depending on the development of the pandemic. The government should announce its decision about it by the middle of February.</p> <p>The new fast spreading omicron variant of the coronavirus was expected by health authorities to become dominant in the country next week.</p> <p>In the nation of 10.7 million, 6.7 million are considered fully vaccinated, while over 2.8 million have received a booster shot.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 US, Japan deal: military stay on bases
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/japan-pm-deal-reached-us-military-curbs-halt-82160525
GIST	<p>TOKYO -- The U.S. and Japan on Sunday agreed to keep American troops within their bases as worries grew about a sharp rise in coronavirus cases in the country.</p> <p>The restrictions starting Monday will last 14 days, confining U.S. military personnel to base facilities except for "essential activities," a statement from the U.S. Forces in Japan said. The Japanese Foreign Ministry released the same statement.</p> <p>The allies will share information and cooperate on coronavirus measures, "given the extraordinary virulence of the omicron variant spreading throughout Japan," the statement said.</p>

U.S. military members will wear masks, both on and off base, when outside their homes, and will continue to carry out strict testing before leaving for and after arrival in Japan, it said.

New COVID-19 cases have surged in Japan, jumping above 8,000 on Saturday, a four-month record. The spike has been most pronounced in areas near U.S. bases. Last week, Japan asked the U.S. for cooperation in keeping its military personnel on base.

Okinawa, a southwestern group of islands that houses most of the 55,000 U.S. troops in Japan, is among the three prefectures where separate government restrictions kicked in Sunday. The measures, which last through the end of the month, include the early closing hours for restaurants, at 8 p.m. or 9 p.m. Some restaurants also must stop serving alcohol.

The restrictions also went into effect in Yamaguchi prefecture, where Iwakuni base is located, and nearby Hiroshima. The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, which documents the U.S. atomic bombing of Japan at the end of World War II, and Hiroshima Castle are both closed to visitors.

Other regions may see similar restrictions if cases keep rising.

People have been warned to stay home and avoid travel. Until recently, bars, shrines and shopping districts have been jam-packed with year-end shoppers and New Year's holiday travelers.

In Tokyo, confirmed daily cases have exceeded 1,200 for the past two days, 14 times the previous week.

Throughout the pandemic, Japan has never imposed a lockdown but has implemented varying levels of restrictions, including school closures and event cancellations.

About 80% of the population have received their second vaccine shots. Boosters have barely started, with fewer than 1% receiving them despite repeated promises by the government to speed up their rollout. Japan has set up stringent border controls, barring most incoming travel except for returning residents and citizens.

Japan has reported about 18,300 COVID-19-related deaths so far. On recent days, there have been just one or two deaths, and on some days, none at all.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Brazil: death toll in rockfall rises
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/death-toll-rockfall-brazilian-lake-rises-10-82166052
GIST	<p>BRASILIA, Brazil -- The death toll from an accident in which a slab of cliff rock toppled onto pleasure boaters on a Brazilian lake has risen to 10, police said Sunday. Authorities worked to identify the dead and divers were searching the lake in case there were more victims.</p> <p>Police Chief Marcos Pimenta said there was a possibility that some people were missing following the accident Saturday in Minas Gerais state. At least 32 people were injured, though most were released from hospitals by Saturday evening.</p> <p>The accident occurred between the towns of Sao Jose da Barra and Capitolio, from which the boats had left. Video images showed a gathering of small boats moving slowly near the sheer rock cliff on Furnas Lake when a fissure appeared in the rock and a huge piece toppled onto several of the vessels.</p> <p>The bodies were taken to Passos city, where coroners worked to identify them. The work was difficult because of the "high energy impact" of the rock on the boaters, said a regional civil police official, Marcos Pimenta. He said one victim had been identified as 68-year-old Júlio Borges Antunes.</p> <p>Furnas Lake, which was created in 1958 for the installation of a hydroelectric plant, is a popular tourist draw in the area roughly 420 kilometers (260 miles) north of Sao Paulo.</p>

	<p>Officials suggested the wall coming loose could have been related to heavy rains recently that caused flooding in the state and forced almost 17,000 people out of their homes.</p> <p>The head of the Applied Geology Division of the Brazilian Geological Service, Tiago Antonelli, said the cliff wall is subject to centuries of erosion and susceptible to rain, heat and cold.</p> <p>“It’s normal to happen in many canyons, even with rocks of that size. But nowadays, with the intensification of tourism, people are starting to get closer to these places and to register these phenomena with their cell phones,” Antonelli said.</p> <p>Joana Sánchez, geology professor at the Federal University of Goiás, said authorities should have been controlling the site to prevent accidents, especially in the rainy season. The boats should have been kept at least one kilometer (0.6 miles) away from the waterfall where the accident happened, she said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 NYC apartment building fire: 19 dead
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/dozens-injured-alarm-fire-york-city-apartment-building/story?id=82164322
GIST	<p>At least 19 people are dead, including nine children, following a massive fire in New York City on Sunday, officials said.</p> <p>More than 200 firefighters responded to the scene of the five-alarm fire that originated Sunday morning in a duplex apartment on the third floor of a high-rise building, located in the Tremont section of the Bronx, officials said. More than 60 people were injured in the fire, according to the New York City Fire Department.</p> <p>Approximately 13 people are in Bronx hospitals with life-threatening injuries, officials said.</p> <p>Many of the injured victims were located on the upper floors and likely suffered from severe smoke inhalation, New York City Fire Department Commissioner Daniel Nigro said during a press conference Sunday afternoon.</p> <p>Firefighters arrived on the scene within three minutes of the initial 911 call and were met with fire in the hallways, Nigro said. A door that was left open allowed the fire and smoke to spread, Nigro added, describing the fire as "unprecedented."</p> <p>The fire never left the hallway on the floor where it originated, he said.</p> <p>The 19-story building was built in 1972 and has 120 units, according to city records.</p> <p>The fire began due to a malfunctioning electric space heater in a bedroom, the FDNY said Sunday evening. Smoke alarms were operable, and it remains under investigation how the smoke traveled so far so quickly.</p> <p>Guillermo Sanchez, a resident who lives on the 16th floor, was making breakfast when he began to smell smoke, he told ABC News.</p> <p>"My son went to the door," he said. "We opened the door. Smoke comes in immediately, so we closed the door."</p> <p>The smoke was so intense, Sanchez said he assumed it was from another apartment on the same floor.</p> <p>Sanchez, emotional from the ordeal, said he and his son called 911 but felt they could not safely take the stairs to exit the building, he said, adding that they were calling family members to tell them they may not make it.</p>

The firefighter who initially knocked on his door said everything was under control, but another firefighter who came a half an hour later said, "You have to come with us," Sanchez said.

"This is going to be one of the worst fires we have witnessed here in modern times in the city of New York," New York City Mayor Eric Adams told reporters Sunday.

Adams praised the first responders, saying many of the firefighters' oxygen tanks eventually became empty but "they still went through the smoke."

Dramatic pictures posted to social media show fire gushing out of multiple windows in the building. FDNY began receiving calls from multiple residents on upper floors just before 11 a.m.

Additional details, including the conditions of the other victims, were not immediately available.

The residents consisted of a largely Muslim and Gambian population and will be aided by the city with particular consideration to cultural needs, Adams told ABC News.

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul appeared at the news conference, saying that she spoke with a mother who lost her entire family in the fire, telling the victims, "We will not forget you. We will not abandon you."

The Bronx Park Phase III Preservation LLC, the name of the joint venture that owns building at 333 E 181st St., said in a statement that it was "devastated" over the tragedy that occurred.

"We are devastated by the unimaginable loss of life caused by this profound tragedy," the statement read. "We are cooperating fully with the Fire Department and other city agencies as they investigate its cause, and we are doing all we can to assist our residents. Our thoughts are with the families and friends of those who lost their lives or were injured, and we are here to support them as we recover from this horrific fire."

A total of 73 people died in New York City fires in all of 2021.

This was the second major fire in the Bronx over the weekend. A four-alarm fire in the Fordham Heights section of the Bronx that began early Saturday morning injured a firefighter and displaced three families, ABC New York station WABC reported. A lithium-ion battery sparked the fire, officials said.

Last week, a fire that broke out on the second story of a row house in Philadelphia killed 13 people, including seven children.

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HEADLINE	01/08 CDC updates straining public health depts.
SOURCE	https://www.nbcnews.com/science/science-news/cdc-updates-are-straining-already-pressed-public-health-departments-rcna11275
GIST	<p>Dr. Michael Kilkenny did not expect the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention news release he received on Dec. 27.</p> <p>Four days earlier, the CDC had cut the isolation time for health care workers with Covid to seven days, if they were asymptomatic and had a negative test. The new announcement said that people with Covid could isolate for just five days after symptoms developed, instead of 10.</p> <p>"When we got a press release on the 27th that seemed to contradict guidance we got on the 23rd — that was quite a bombshell for us," said Kilkenny, chief executive officer and health officer of the Cabell-Huntington Health Department, which serves Huntington, West Virginia, and the surrounding county.</p>

Around the country, schools and health organizations scrambled to interpret the news release and adjust their policies — only to change course again when the CDC filled out details and its rationale in full guidance published about a week later.

“That gap left us guessing what we should actually do,” Kilkenny said. “That’s not good management and good communication. It leads to misunderstanding. It leads to distrust.”

The CDC decision to cut isolation times in half for many people who have caught Covid-19 took local public health agencies by surprise and left some struggling to explain to their communities exactly what the changes meant and why federal officials had made them. Gaps in communication between federal, state and local officials have left some public health leaders fearing that they’ve lost trust with those they serve amid public confusion.

In interviews, three local public health leaders, one state leader and two leaders of medical associations offered a mixture of reactions to the CDC’s recent shifts: frustration over lack of communication but also understanding that every public health officer faces challenges in making timely changes and offering clear guidance. None took issue with the guidance itself.

“We were hearing from the hospitals, in particular, great concern for how we were going to be able to keep operations going,” said Dr. Philip Huang, the director of the Dallas County Health and Human Services department in Texas, who said his agency was looking at changes to local quarantine and isolation protocols before the CDC made its recommendations. “Was it ideal? No. I think though, these are extraordinary times with lots of variables and things happening.”

The rapid spread of the omicron variant intensified a pandemic tension for public health officials: How to move quickly while also sending clear and consistent messages to a weary public. It didn’t help that the variant was taking off during what many had hoped would be a holiday break.

As omicron took hold in December, federal officials responded with a flurry of changes.

First, the CDC shortened its recommendations for isolation time for Covid-positive health [workers to seven days after a negative test on Dec. 23](#). It said health workers who had received booster shots did not need to quarantine after exposures.

Then, on Dec. 27, the agency [announced in a news release](#) that it was shortening isolation time for the broader public to five days if symptoms were resolving, with another five days of masking afterward.

The agency did not publish a [full update and rationale](#) behind the new policies until Jan. 4, when it also clarified policies for special groups like those in health care, jails and homeless shelters.

Some health experts [have criticized the policies](#), which lack testing requirements for the broader public. Meantime, many in the general public expressed confusion.

Federal officials have said they changed the guidelines over concerns that omicron’s rapid spread would shut down essential services and also because they believe the majority of viral transmission takes place early in infection.

But local officials say they were left in the dark about what, exactly, they ought to be telling members of their community who had questions about the new advice.

“The press release of Dec. 27 surprised me,” said Kilkenny, who added that he trusts the agency to make sound decisions based on science and that he follows the agency’s recommendations almost religiously. “We act on guidance. We don’t act on press release.”

Lori Freeman, chief executive of the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), said the CDC typically communicates in advance over major policy shifts. That didn't happen this time.

"There were no talking points, if you will, or details about the changing guidance," Freeman said, adding that local health officials "had a hard time answering questions and responding in a positive or informed way."

That left some officials out of step with the news of the day.

"The more it appears to be disjointed, that's when people begin to question the actual guidance," Freeman said.

And local public health leaders worry that their influence on important health measures has already waned dramatically.

"A good many of our public have stopped listening to us entirely. Certainly, I can't get any more people to get vaccinated or wear masks than what are doing it now based on anything I say," Kilkenny said.

Michael Fraser, the executive director of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, said omicron became an emergency at an unfortunate time, during the holidays when tired public health officials and the rest of the nation were eager for a break.

But omicron was spreading so fast that it was becoming, from his perspective, scary.

"I think we're really misplacing criticism on CDC right now," Fraser said. "We were extremely concerned and hospital capacity was very limited. They needed to do something."

Some states, like Michigan, initially refused to adopt the recommendations, but came around later after hearing more about the CDC's rationale, Fraser said.

And local health leaders said the new CDC guidance might better reflect what disruptions people are willing to deal with in some communities. Some people were not following the prior quarantine guidelines, which recommended that unvaccinated people quarantine for 14 days after an exposure.

"Our compliance for recommending that was very low after two years," said Lisa Macon Harrison, health director for Granville and Vance counties in North Carolina, adding that science must be balanced with the realities of what people are willing to do to reduce the spread of the virus.

Harrison, also the board president of NACCHO, said she would have preferred that federal, state and local agencies be in lockstep over how to talk about the new guidelines, but that wasn't always possible.

"It's frustrating not to be in the know on every decision and yes, I give grace to the fact that we're all in a pandemic response," Harrison said. "We sometimes have to make decisions faster than allows for inclusive discourse."

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HEADLINE	01/08 Fla. in Covid surge; 2 nd -lowest US death rate
SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-us/health/medical/florida-e2-80-99s-covid-cases-and-hospitalizations-are-surging-but-the-state-has-the-second-lowest-death-rate-in-the-nation-what-e2-80-99s-going-on/ar-AASyQKx
GIST	<p>With COVID cases skyrocketing, Florida is experiencing one of the worst waves of the omicron variant in the United States.</p> <p>Yet Florida's death rate over the past seven days is the second lowest in the country, after only Alaska. What's going on?</p>

Even as record COVID cases in the U.S. were reported last week, deaths dipped slightly, and still, Florida's death rate is distinctly low, particularly in a state with a large, vulnerable elderly population.

Experts say several factors could explain the currently low rate: Florida's horrific toll from delta and its acquired resistance and vaccination rates may be buffering the state at a time when others states are contending with two variants. Or, because of the way Florida reports COVID deaths, which already tend to lag infections and hospitalizations, the true death rate from this recent wave may be too soon to know.

Only months ago, the state's death rate was among the highest in the nation. The delta wave hit Florida hard, taking the lives of more than 22,000 people between June 15 and October 15. On its worst day for deaths during the delta wave, 403 people succumbed to the disease in Florida.

"Florida had the worst or second-worst outbreak in the country for delta," said Dr. Howard Forman, a Yale physician, professor, and COVID tracker. "Because of that, there are a lot of people in Florida with infection-acquired immunity and vaccine acquired immunity against delta. By the time the omicron wave came, Florida had almost no delta, where places like New York were just beginning a delta wave when omicron appeared."

Globally, omicron has not appeared as deadly as the delta variant.

World Health Organization officials noted that may be due to several factors — including rising vaccination rates in some places and signs that omicron affects the nose and throat more than the lungs, which previously triggered COVID deaths.

But it still may be too early to know how deadly omicron will be in the Sunshine State.

Florida's distinct method for reporting deaths

Florida is the only state that reports COVID deaths to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention by the date the death occurred rather than the date reported to the state, or a combination of the two, according to a notation on the agency's website. The way Florida reports can give the appearance overall deaths are decreasing, the CDC notes. "This does not reflect a true decline and data should be interpreted with caution."

In the last nine days, Florida has seen a slight uptick in in-hospital COVID deaths.

The average number of deaths per day has risen to 33 over the recent 9 days, from 16 deaths on average for the nine-day period prior. That's still way less than the 286 deaths per day on average for the nine days during the worst of the delta wave, according to data compiled by University of South Florida epidemiologist Jason Salemi.

The age distribution of new COVID hospital admissions was not that different than now, he notes.

"The in-hospital deaths are certainly higher than what we had been seeing. ... It's a noticeable uptick," Salemi said. "But relative to hospitalizations, you would have expected the numbers to be much higher than they are."

Florida's seven-day average as of Friday was of 0.09 deaths a day per 100,000, or the state with the second-lowest rate in the country. Wyoming had the highest rate of all the states, with 1.14 deaths per 100,000. Overall, more than 62,000 people have died of COVID in Florida.

Possible explanations

Amira Roess, professor of Global Health and Epidemiology at George Mason University's College of Health and Human Services, agreed that Florida's low death rate was surprising and suggested several possible explanations.

One possible reason is the vaccination rate in Florida picked up much later than other parts of the country, and Floridians also got the disease later than people in other states, meaning they acquired resistance more recently, which would make it stronger, Roess said.

Another explanation, she said, is Florida's high death rate in the delta wave could be holding down the death rate now. "It's possible that the individuals that were most susceptible to the virus already had it, were very sick or died," she said.

But with the soaring infection rates of the past few weeks, she said it's too early to conclude that Florida's low death rate will persist.

"Death rates is one of those lagging indicators," she said. "What we're going to want to keep an eye on is the death rates for the next two or three weeks. And two or three weeks after the peak of reported COVID cases. Then you're going to really want to pay attention to the death rate and the hospitalization rate."

Typically as a pandemic wave begins, cases rise, then hospital COVID wards and intensive care units fill up and eventually reported COVID deaths will follow.

Omicron's extraordinary transmissibility has been evident since it was first detected in South Africa when cases rose quickly. But cases in South Africa are now declining as are hospitalizations — and deaths have not come close to the highs seen over the summer and last winter.

More COVID deaths ahead

Still, even if omicron's symptoms are milder, the variant is killing people and experts are predicting an uptick in Florida's death rate.

Forman said he initially predicted 5,000 deaths during the newest COVID wave in Florida. He now has adjusted the number upward to at least 10,000.

"I think it will pass last winter's wave in Florida. People have been lulled into believing omicron is benign, and it's not benign. Florida is probably approaching a peak in cases. My expectation is deaths will follow."

The Yale professor tweeted Friday: "Last year, it took us until January 8 or 9 for deaths to rebound from the holiday/artificially depressed levels. I am expecting that we will see substantial growth in deaths for the next several weeks, as massive numbers of less virulent Omicron cases work their way through."

Jeremy Redfern, press secretary for the Department of Health, offers an explanation on why he believes Florida's death rate is lower at this time than other states.

"Vaccines are still great at what they should have been marketed for which is preventing severe illness, hospitalizations, and deaths," he said.

Redfern notes that, according to the CDC, 79% of the state's eligible population has had at least one dose of a vaccine, and "that does confer some level of protection."

Redfern also agrees that Florida was poised better than other states when omicron arrived: "In theory, Florida has already dealt with what was going to happen during delta, and other states are still catching up in their COVID deaths."

"Florida will likely see an increase in deaths from COVID in the weeks to come, but as long as the current pattern holds, it is not expected to be anywhere near what the state experienced during the delta wave," he said.

He also noted that Florida's death toll could have been worse if delta had resurged this winter. "We probably would have seen an uptick in deaths from delta if omicron had not become the dominant variant."

Mary Jo Trepka, an infectious disease epidemiologist at Florida International University, said Florida's death rate now is a reflection of November when the infection and hospitalization rates were low.

"We won't really start to see omicron deaths for a few more weeks so people shouldn't feel good about it yet," Trepka said. "Any time you see a lot of hospitalizations, you will start to see more deaths. " With delays in reporting and certifying COVID deaths, she said, "I don't think we will even have an idea until March about mortality related to this surge."

ICU beds are filling up

Throughout the pandemic, one of the main predictors of COVID deaths has been the number of patients with the disease in intensive-care units.

In late November, when omicron first made its way into the country, only about 4% of ICU beds in Florida were filled with COVID patients, the lowest in many months.

And now, while the number of patients hospitalized for COVID in Florida has jumped 150% in the four weeks, ICU beds occupied with COVID patients increased 125%. The percentage of ICU beds filled by COVID patients in Florida's intensive-care units is up to 17%.

At Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami-Dade, Dr. Lilly Lee, chief of emergency medicine, says most of the health system's COVID patients are not in the ICU. "With delta so many were on high-flow oxygen or required intubation. We rarely see that need at all now."

But Lee said she can't be sure the COVID death rate will remain at its low levels. "Some patients do still get very sick with this variant, especially if they are unvaccinated or have no immune response. They still end up on ventilators, but we have a high vaccination rate in the county and we are not dealing with delta."

In recent months, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has promoted "early treatment saves lives," encouraging Floridians to get monoclonal antibodies when testing positive to prevent severe disease, especially if someone is high risk.

"There is no doubt that many lives have been saved as a result of making these treatments widely available," the governor said during a news briefing earlier this week.

The Department of Health reports Florida has given out 130,000 treatments since Aug. 12. However, evidence suggests these same treatments are losing their effectiveness in the fight against the mutating virus and likely will not work as well to lessen the effect of the disease during the new wave.

If Florida's low death rate stems from the preponderance of treatment, a reporting backlog, or the lack of severity in the age group most infected, the next few weeks should offer some insight into how the state fares, COVID trackers say.

On Friday, Florida broke its single-day record with 76,887 new COVID cases.

However, more than a third of Florida's cases are people ages 20 to 29.

"We could end up with a situation where we have a ton of cases, a lot of people hospitalized and a much better chance of keeping people alive," Salemi said. "If omicron is less severe, it's less likely to kill the younger people who are getting infected in Florida in a higher proportion."

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SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/india/indias-total-covid-19-cases-reach-3552-mln-health-ministry-2022-01-09/
GIST	<p>MUMBAI, Jan 9 (Reuters) - India reported 159,632 new COVID-19 cases on Sunday, as the Omicron variant of the coronavirus continues to spread rapidly in the country, nudging several state governments to impose fresh restrictions.</p> <p>India's richest state, Maharashtra, said on Saturday it would close swimming pools and gyms from Monday while schools and colleges have been closed till Feb 15 after daily cases in the state jumped to over 41,000.</p> <p>The state government has said only fully vaccinated people will be allowed into private offices while limiting the capacity to 50% of the total workforce.</p> <p>In the neighbouring state of Gujarat, authorities have extended night curfew hours and cancelled leave for all healthcare personnel.</p> <p>Prime Minister Narendra Modi will chair a meeting to review the COVID-19 situation later on Sunday, according to government sources.</p> <p>The health ministry reported 327 new deaths, taking the official death toll since the start of the pandemic to 483,790. Total infections stand at 35.52 million.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Kazakhstan authorities: situation stabilized
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/kazakhstan-says-strategic-facilities-under-guard-after-unrest-2022-01-09/
GIST	<p>ALMATY, Jan 9 (Reuters) - Kazakhstan authorities said on Sunday they had stabilised the situation across the country after the deadliest outbreak of violence in 30 years of independence, and troops from a Russian-led military alliance were guarding "strategic facilities".</p> <p>Security and intelligence officials briefed President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev that they were continuing "clean-up" actions in what he has called a huge counter-terrorism operation across the oil-producing former Soviet republic that borders Russia and China.</p> <p>Dozens of people have been killed, thousands detained and public buildings torched over the past week, prompting Tokayev to issue shoot-to-kill orders to end unrest he has blamed on bandits and terrorists.</p> <p>At Tokayev's invitation, the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) sent troops to restore order, an intervention that comes at a time of high tension in Russia-U.S. relations ahead of talks this week on the Ukraine crisis.</p> <p>"A number of strategic facilities have been transferred under the protection of the united peacekeeping contingent of the CSTO member states," the presidential office said in a statement detailing the security briefing chaired by Tokayev.</p> <p>It did not identify the facilities. Last week, Russia's space agency said security had been strengthened around Kazakhstan's Baikonur Cosmodrome, used by Russia for space launches. The protests disrupted production at the Chevron-operated Tengiz oil field.</p> <p>"The situation has been stabilized in all regions of the country," it said, adding law enforcement agencies had seized back control of administrative buildings and vital services were being restored.</p> <p>What began a week ago with demonstrations against a fuel price rise exploded into a wider protest against Tokayev's government and the man he replaced as president of the resource-rich former Soviet republic, Nursultan Nazarbayev.</p>

The violence has dealt a blow to Kazakhstan's image as a tightly controlled and stable country, which it has used to attract hundreds of billions of dollars of Western investment in its oil and minerals industries.

It has opened a rift in the ruling elite, with Tokayev fighting to consolidate his authority after sacking key officials and removing Nazarbayev from a powerful role as head of the Security Council.

The former intelligence chief and two-time prime minister Karim Massimov, seen as close to Nazarbayev, has been arrested on suspicion of treason but authorities have not disclosed any details of the allegations against him.

State television took the unusual step at the top of its hourly news bulletin of underlining that Tokayev was "the highest official of the state, the chairman of the Security Council. In this capacity he takes decisions independently."

The administration said 5,800 people had been arrested in connection with the unrest.

State television said two soldiers were among those killed, and 163 had been wounded. As security operations continued, it said about 400 people had been arrested in the city of Shymkent near the border with Uzbekistan.

CASH MACHINES GUTTED

In Almaty, the biggest city where much of the violence was concentrated, normal life appeared to be returning on Sunday although with fewer cars than usual.

Security forces have set up checkpoints around the perimeter of the city. In the centre, smashed windows, gutted cash machines and torched buildings bore witness to the destruction.

The main Republic Square where the charred mayor's office is located remained sealed off to the public. One road leading to it was cordoned off by police; another was blocked by a burnt-out bus.

A Reuters correspondent saw two military vehicles with mounted machine guns driving towards the square. Most of the dozens of civilian and police cars torched during the unrest had been removed by Sunday.

The internet remained heavily restricted, with access only available to the presidential website and a handful of other local news websites.

A spokesman for Magnum, the biggest supermarket chain, said of the 68 stores in Almaty, 15 had been completely looted.

Staff at a shopping mall told Reuters that video cameras showed looters attacking an ATM, changing into stolen clothes and shoes at the stores and walking out wearing two or three coats.

Yerkin Zhumabekov, a manager at the mall, said: "They arrived in cars with no number plates at night, they destroyed everything. They took everything they could, shoes, clothes, cosmetics."

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HEADLINE	01/09 Ukraine sidelined in high-level talks
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/09/world/europe/left-out-of-high-level-talks-ukraine-tries-other-diplomatic-channels.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=World%20News
GIST	KYIV, Ukraine — Peace negotiations are usually thought to involve two sides brought together by a mediator trying to tease out possible compromises, far from the anger and destruction of the battlefield.

But talks starting in Geneva Monday on the eight-year-old war in Ukraine are different. The conflict — and [an overtly threatened Russian invasion](#) that the talks are intended to forestall — may be in Ukraine. But Ukraine will be missing from two of the three negotiating sessions scheduled for this week.

The absence of any concrete role for Ukraine in the talks has clearly unnerved the government in Kyiv. Fearing the talks will yield little or nothing, and with President Biden's statement that the United States would not intervene militarily if Russia invades, Ukraine has quietly pursued its own negotiating track with Moscow.

The current crisis began last month, when Russia massed more than 100,000 troops along its borders with Ukraine and [demanded wide-ranging](#) — and, to Western analysts, impossible — concessions from the United States and NATO on matters of European security.

Those were laid out in two draft treaties proposed by Moscow that the government in Kyiv — because it is not a member of the alliance — has no say over. President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia subsequently [threatened](#) to launch an invasion of Ukraine if the talks on its proposals should fail.

In effect, that made Ukraine “the hostage,” of Russia, said Kostiantyn Yelisieiev, a former Ukrainian ambassador to the European Union.

Moscow's sidelining of Ukraine and its demand for direct talks with the United States and NATO were intentional, Mr. Yelisieiev said.

One of Russia's key demands is that NATO exclude any possibility of Ukraine's membership in the alliance — NATO has already rejected that — and halt all military cooperation with the country. Russia also requested that the alliance halt all military activities throughout Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

“The issues concern all of Europe, including Ukraine, but Putin suggests discussions between Russia and the United States,” Mr. Yelisieiev said. “Russia in this way made an announcement of a sphere of influence. ‘You leave us the former Soviet space and do what you want elsewhere.’”

A Ukrainian delegation will take part in the third of the three rounds of talks, scheduled for Thursday in Vienna under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The United States has said it is coordinating closely with the authorities in Kyiv.

“No decisions about Ukraine without Ukraine,” the Ukrainian foreign minister, [Dmytro Kuleba](#), [posted](#) on Twitter last week, noting he will also meet with NATO officials in Brussels. “Part of a wide diplomatic effort to deter further Russian aggression.”

The current threat follows eight years of low-level conflict. Russia intervened militarily in Ukraine in 2014, annexing the Crimean Peninsula and fomenting separatist uprisings in two eastern provinces, leading to the deaths of about 13,000 people.

Given the stakes for Ukraine, the government of President Volodymyr Zelensky has decided not to rely wholly on the U.S.-led negotiations. Mr. Zelensky announced a separate, Ukrainian diplomatic initiative with Russia in late December, the specifics of which were later [published](#) in the Russian newspaper Kommersant.

The 10-point Ukrainian plan, which is bound to be highly contentious in Ukraine, begins with three confidence-building steps — a cease-fire, an exchange of prisoners and the opening of crossing points for civilians on the front line in the eastern Ukraine war — then moves to political issues. The first point, the cease-fire, has already been [implemented](#).

The political matters involve direct talks between Mr. Zelensky and Mr. Putin and a final point, No. 10, under which the Ukrainian government would submit to Parliament laws granting self-rule to separatist areas and devolving some powers to these areas, according to Kommersant.

In the Russian interpretation, these laws would grant its proxies in eastern Ukraine veto power over foreign policy decisions by the central government, including NATO membership for Ukraine, potentially satisfying enough of Russia's request to forestall a catastrophic war in Ukraine.

Western diplomats say the proposed laws leave wiggle room for interpretation, and that Mr. Zelensky is unlikely to grant Moscow veto power over future NATO membership. The proposal says nothing about the aspiration for NATO membership written into Ukraine's Constitution and has seemingly stalled after the cease-fire, announced on Dec. 22.

Like so many other diplomatic efforts to end the war, this one is given little chance of success by most analysts, but it could serve other purposes. Ukraine can do "nothing" in diplomacy but wait for the possible outbreak of violence, said Oleksandr Danylyuk, a former secretary of the Ukrainian Security Council. "This is why Putin is doing this. It's his goal to show that Ukraine cannot do anything."

And the negotiating effort could have one lasting effect: Mr. Zelensky's apparent willingness to negotiate over autonomy for the separatist regions and any hint of accepting neutrality between the West and Russia could [cause a firestorm](#) in Ukrainian politics.

To date, none of the diplomatic talks with Russia, whether with the United States or Ukraine, have slowed the stream of ominous statements from Russian officials that diplomats and analysts worry could be used to justify military action or prepare the Russian population for a war.

In July, Mr. Putin published an article arguing that Russia and Ukraine are essentially the same country, with a shared history and culture, suggesting a reason for unification.

The threats became more focused in August after the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, when senior Russian security officials publicly taunted Ukraine that it, too, could soon lose the United States as a protector.

"The country is headed toward collapse, and the White House at a certain moment won't even remember about its supporters in Kyiv," Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of Russia's Security Council, [told](#) Izvestia newspaper soon after the fall of Kabul.

In December, Mr. Putin, speaking to a gathering of generals and security officials, said Moscow might resort to "military-technical" means if Western nations "continue the obviously aggressive stance."

A deputy foreign minister for Russia, Aleksandr Grushko, more explicitly linked a threat of Russian military force to a breakdown in the talks.

"The Europeans must also think about whether they want to avoid making their continent the scene of a military confrontation," Mr. Grushko said. "They have a choice. Either take seriously what is put on the table or face a military-technical alternative."

Echoing American claims used to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Russian defense minister, Sergei K. Shoigu, claimed without providing evidence that Moscow had intelligence showing that American mercenaries had brought an "unidentified chemical component" into Ukraine.

Pro-Kremlin commentators have cheered the Kremlin's tough stance as a Russian nationalist triumph.

One newspaper [compared](#) Moscow favorably to a gangster character in a Russian movie who, "raising his heavy fist and looking into the eyes of his interlocutor, gently asks again: Where is your strength America?"

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SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/09/us/politics/border-patrol-chases.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — Angie Simms had been searching for her 25-year-old son for a week, filing a missing persons report and calling anyone who might have seen him, when the call came last August. Her son, Erik A. Molix, was in a hospital in El Paso, Texas, where he was strapped to his bed, on a ventilator and in a medically induced coma.</p> <p>Mr. Molix had suffered head trauma after the S.U.V. he was driving with nine undocumented immigrants inside rolled over near Las Cruces, N.M., while Border Patrol agents pursued him at speeds of up to 73 miles per hour. He died Aug. 15, nearly two weeks after the crash; even by then, no one from the Border Patrol or any other law enforcement or government agency had contacted his family.</p> <p>The number of migrants crossing the border illegally has soared, with the Border Patrol recording the highest number of encounters in more than six decades in the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30. With the surge has come an increase in deaths and injuries from high-speed chases by the Border Patrol, a trend that Customs and Border Protection, which oversees the Border Patrol, attributes to a rise in brazen smugglers trying to flee its agents.</p> <p>From 2010 to 2019, high-speed chases by the Border Patrol resulted in an average of 3.5 deaths a year, according to the American Civil Liberties Union. In 2020, there were 14 such deaths; in 2021, there were 21, the last on Christmas.</p> <p>The agency recorded more than 700 “use of force” incidents on or near the southern border in the last fiscal year. Customs and Border Protection does not disclose how many of those ended in death, or how many high-speed chases take place each year.</p> <p>Crossing the border without documentation or helping people do so is full of risk regardless of the circumstances, and stopping such crossings — and the criminal activity of smugglers — is central to the Border Patrol’s job. But the rising deaths raise questions about how far the agency should go with pursuits of smugglers and migrants, and when and how agents should engage in high-speed chases.</p> <p>Customs and Border Protection has yet to provide Ms. Simms, a fifth-grade teacher in San Diego, with an explanation of what happened to her son. She saw a news release it issued two weeks after the crash; officials say it is not the agency’s responsibility to explain. She said she understood that officials suspected her son was involved in illegal activity, transporting undocumented immigrants.</p> <p>“But that doesn’t mean you have to die for it,” she said.</p> <p>Customs and Border Protection, which is part of the Department of Homeland Security, has a policy stating that agents and officers can conduct high-speed chases when they determine “that the law enforcement benefit and need for emergency driving outweighs the immediate and potential danger created by such emergency driving.” The A.C.L.U. argues that the policy, which the agency publicly disclosed for the first time last month, gives agents too much discretion in determining the risk to public safety.</p> <p>In a statement to The New York Times, Alejandro N. Mayorkas, the secretary of homeland security, said that while “C.B.P. agents and officers risk their lives every day to keep our communities safe,” the Homeland Security Department “owes the public the fair, objective and transparent investigation of use-of-force incidents to ensure that our highest standards are maintained and enforced.”</p> <p>But previously unreported documents and details of the crash that killed Mr. Molix shed light on what critics say is a troubling pattern in which the Border Patrol keeps its operations opaque, despite the rising human toll of aggressive enforcement actions.</p> <p>A high-speed chase</p> <p>Early on Aug. 3, a Border Patrol agent saw an S.U.V. traveling slowly just north of Las Cruces with what appeared to be a heavy load, according to a report from the New Mexico State Police.</p>

When the S.U.V. swerved to avoid a Border Patrol checkpoint, on a lonely stretch of road about 70 miles north of the border, the agent and a colleague in a separate car started chasing it. They pursued it for about a mile before one of them “clipped the vehicle and it rolled,” according to local emergency dispatch records. Eight of the 10 passengers — migrants from Ecuador, Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador — were ejected. An Ecuadorean man later died.

The New Mexico State Police was among the agencies that responded to the crash. Body camera footage from a state police officer captured one of the Border Patrol agents saying: “Our critical incident team is coming out. They’ll do all the crime scene stuff — well, not crime scene, but critical incident scene.”

The agent said that he and his colleague would give statements to the team, which it would share with the police.

Critical incident teams are rarely mentioned by Customs and Border Protection or the Border Patrol. There is no public description of the scope of their authority.

Luis Miranda, a spokesman for Customs and Border Protection, said the teams consist of “highly trained evidence collection experts” who gather and process evidence for investigations, including inquiries into human smuggling and drug trafficking. He also said the teams assist in investigations conducted by the agency’s Office of Professional Responsibility, which looks into claims of agent misconduct and is akin to internal affairs divisions of police departments.

Another Homeland Security official, who was authorized to speak to a reporter about the teams on the condition that the official’s name was not used, confirmed another role they have: collecting evidence that could be used to protect a Border Patrol agent and “help deal with potential liability issues,” such as a future civil suit.

Andrea Guerrero, who leads a community group in San Diego and has spent the past year looking into critical incident teams and their work, said it was “an outright conflict of interest” for the division charged with investigating possible Border Patrol misconduct to rely on assistance from Border Patrol agents on the teams. She has called on Congress to investigate and filed a complaint with the Homeland Security Department.

Customs and Border Protection officials said the El Paso sector’s critical incident team merely helped with measurements for a reconstruction of the crash outside Las Cruces; the Office of Professional Responsibility, they said, is investigating the incident. Yet a member of the El Paso critical incident team reached out to the state police in the days after the crash seeking the department’s full report for its own Border Patrol administrative review, according to an email released by the state police.

Few public answers

Border Patrol encounters that result in injury or death can be investigated by multiple entities: the F.B.I., state and local law enforcement, the Homeland Security Department’s inspector general or Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, and the Office of Professional Responsibility, where most such incidents land for review. But the findings on individual cases are rarely disclosed; such investigations tend to yield few public details beyond total numbers, which show only a fraction result in some type of discipline.

An [incident in 2010](#) drew international attention and calls for change. A 42-year-old Mexican caught entering the country illegally died after he was hogtied, beaten and shocked with a Taser by Border Patrol agents. The Justice Department [declined to investigate](#), but more than a decade later, the case will be heard this year by the [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights](#) court — an apparent first for a person killed by a U.S. law enforcement officer.

After the man’s death, the Obama administration made [changes](#) to address a [litany](#) of excessive force complaints against Border Patrol agents and bring more transparency and accountability to Customs and

Border Protection. An external review of Customs and Border Protection's use-of-force policy recommended defining the authority and role of critical incident teams.

Chuck Wexler, the executive director of the [Police Executive Research Forum](#), a nonprofit policy and research organization that conducted the external review, said that if his organization had known more at the time about the team's purpose, it would have "raised red flags." But instead of explaining what the teams did, the agency cut any mention of them out of the use-of-force policy.

In another case brimming with questions, a Border Patrol agent in Nogales, Ariz., shot an undocumented woman who was unarmed, Marisol García Alcántara, in the head last June while she sat in the back seat of a car. A Nogales Police Department report noted that the Border Patrol supervisor at the scene refused to provide information to officers about what had happened in the lead-up to the crash. The report also noted that a critical incident team arrived on the scene.

Ms. García Alcántara, a mother of three, was taken to a hospital in Tucson, where doctors removed most of the bullet from her head. Three days later, she was discharged and sent to an Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention center, where she remained for 22 days before being deported to Mexico. She said she was never interviewed by law enforcement; a Customs and Border Protection official said the F.B.I. was investigating.

Representative Raúl M. Grijalva of Arizona, a Democrat who represents Tucson, said Ms. García Alcántara's case raised questions about the "illegal practice" of the critical incident teams which, he said, have no legal authorization and escape the oversight of Congress. Other [lawmakers](#), too, are demanding answers.

Answers have not come easily for Ms. Simms, who had overheard whispers about a car crash and the Border Patrol while she sat by her son in the hospital.

Three days after Mr. Molix died, Ms. Simms heard from Customs and Border Protection for the first time. "We wanted to give our condolences to you and your family," an investigator with the Office of Professional Responsibility texted. "We also needed to see if we could meet you to sign a medical release form for Mr. Erik Anthony Molix."

An A.C.L.U. lawyer, Shaw Drake, pieced together the details of the crash using police reports, body camera footage and records of emergency dispatch calls that he obtained through public records requests.

Details of the investigation into what Mr. Molix was doing that day remain under wraps. Customs and Border Protection said that because Mr. Molix was not in Border Patrol custody after he was admitted to the hospital, it was not obliged to notify his family about his injuries.

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HEADLINE	01/08 'Forever boosting' to beat coronavirus?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/08/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#is-forever-boosting-in-our-future-and-will-that-beat-the-coronavirus
GIST	<p>A year ago, just two doses of a Covid-19 vaccine — or even one, in the case of Johnson & Johnson's formulation — were thought to offer sufficient protection against the coronavirus.</p> <p>Now, faced with the extraordinarily contagious Omicron variant, Israel has begun offering fourth doses to some high-risk groups. On Wednesday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention expanded eligibility for boosters to adolescents and backed away from describing anyone as "fully vaccinated" because two shots no longer seem adequate.</p> <p>Instead, one's vaccination status will now be "up to date" — or not. It's no surprise that many Americans are wondering: Where does this end? Are we to roll up our sleeves for booster shots every few months?</p>

Humbled repeatedly by a virus that has defied expectations, scientists are reluctant to predict the future. But in interviews this week, nearly a dozen said that whatever happens, trying to boost the entire population every few months is not realistic. Nor does it make much scientific sense.

“It’s not unheard-of to give vaccines periodically, but I think there are better ways than doing boosters every six months,” said Akiko Iwasaki, an immunologist at Yale University. Other strategies, she said, could “get us out of this forever-boosting kind of a situation.”

For starters, persuading people to line up for shots every few months is probably a losing proposition. Just as important, there are no data to support the effectiveness of a fourth dose of the current vaccines.

Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson have all said that they are testing vaccines targeting Omicron that may become available in a few months.

“It doesn’t make sense to keep boosting against a strain that’s already gone,” said Ali Ellebedy, an immunologist at Washington University in St. Louis. “If you are going to add one more dose after three, I would definitely wait for an Omicron-based one.”

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HEADLINE	01/09 Grappling with disruption, dismay, dissent
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/09/us/united-states-covid-pandemic-omicron.html
GIST	<p>CHICAGO — With infection rates mounting, the Omicron variant has ushered in a new and disorienting phase of the pandemic, leaving Americans frustrated and dismayed that the basic elements they thought they understood about the coronavirus are shifting faster than ever.</p> <p>There were reasons for heightened concern and reasons for consolation: Omicron is more transmissible than previous variants, yet it appears to cause milder symptoms in many people. Hospitalizations have soared to new highs in some states, but “incidental patients” — people who test positive for Covid-19 after being admitted for another reason — make up close to half of their cases in some hospitals.</p> <p>Public health officials, in response to the new variant, have halved the recommended isolation period for people with positive tests to five days from 10 days, while also suggesting people upgrade their masks from cloth to medical-grade when possible.</p> <p>“Omicron has turned, quickly, into something that is just different,” said Dr. Allison Arwady, Chicago’s top health official.</p> <p>Amid shifting federal public health guidance and the new and distinct variant, President Biden’s own former transition team has called on the president to adopt an entirely new domestic pandemic strategy geared to the “new normal” of living with the virus indefinitely, not to wiping it out.</p> <p>And Americans, confronted with these new sets of facts, warnings and advisories, have responded with a mix of confusion, vigilance and indifference. Left mainly to navigate it all on their own, they must sort through an array of uncertain risks — ride a bus? visit friends? eat inside? — hour by hour.</p> <p>Many people wonder whether they should keep their children home from school or cancel vacations and dinners out. They scramble for at-home antigen tests or appointments for sophisticated P.C.R. tests and are discarding cloth masks in favor of KN95s and N95s. In some cities, they have returned to wearing masks even outside, and are ordering grocery deliveries or stocking up on supplies to avoid trips for the days ahead.</p> <p>Others have shrugged off the rising cases, focusing on the encouraging fact that some people who are infected with the Omicron variant suffer little more than a cough and runny nose — if they show symptoms at all.</p>

While some places have maintained limits like restrictions on indoor dining for the unvaccinated, there is little appetite for broad shutdowns. A restaurateur in Austin, Texas, said that customers were out and about, eager to gather in groups.

“It’s obvious: People are over it,” said Daniel Brooks, 45, who owns two restaurants in Austin.

For the most part, American life has not locked down in the latest wave — businesses remain open and schools are largely in session in person — yet this variant has brought significant disruptions to daily life and threatens to bring still more.

Police officers, paramedics and firefighters have been sidelined with the virus, affecting response times in some cities. Across the country, millions of Americans have been sick at home in recent days, igniting debates over testing and safety measures in schools and alarming officials who told the public in blunt terms this past week that they were running dangerously low on hospital beds and health care workers.

“I suspect just about everybody in the state now either has just had Covid, has it today or knows somebody who does,” Gov. John Bel Edwards of Louisiana said. “There has never been more of the disease in our state.”

Omicron emerged in southern Africa in late November, and by Christmas it was the dominant variant in the United States, Britain and parts of continental Europe, including Denmark and Portugal, which have some of the highest vaccination rates in the world.

The record-high caseloads fueled by Omicron have produced their own form of chaos globally, sidelining millions of workers with infections, prompting shortages of test kits and forcing many governments to reimpose social restrictions. Spain, Greece and Italy ordered their citizens to return to wearing masks outdoors; the Netherlands retreated into full lockdown.

The variant is now battering nearly every corner of the world. [India](#), bracing for a tidal wave of infections with only half its population vaccinated, has set up makeshift Covid wards in convention halls. In [Argentina](#) recently, the test positivity rate rose to a staggering 30 percent.

But with signs that the wave of Omicron in [South Africa is receding](#), without bringing a huge new surge of deaths, many countries have moved to a strategy of living with the virus, opting to keep businesses and schools open rather than risk the economic havoc of more lockdowns.

Health officials in the United States, weary from two years of repeating similar pleas to the public, have tried to emphasize that the Omicron variant is like no other phase of the pandemic.

Daily case reports have roughly quintupled over the last month as Omicron has taken hold. About 650,000 new cases are being identified each day, more than twice as many as at last winter’s peak — a number that is certainly an undercount, since it does not include many results from at-home antigen tests.

So far, hospitalizations have increased at a much slower pace than cases. But the number of coronavirus patients is still growing rapidly, to about 134,000 nationwide, up from about 67,000 a month ago. In many cities, doctors [say](#), a smaller proportion of Covid patients are landing in intensive care units or requiring mechanical ventilation, but the sheer number of patients is raising alarms.

Deaths, which are a lagging indicator, have not yet increased as significantly. About 1,500 deaths from Covid-19 are being announced every day in the United States. It could be weeks, officials said, before they will know whether the Omicron variant will result in another large wave of deaths in the United States, where more than 830,000 people have died from the coronavirus.

Andrew Noymer, a public health professor at the University of California, Irvine, said that the Omicron variant has been “legitimately complicated” for many Americans to comprehend, since it clearly differs from previous variants.

“Omicron is milder than Delta, but it’s more transmissible,” he said. “It’s changing two things at once.”

Shifting advice on isolation and quarantines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has also left Americans with questions about the seriousness of the variant. Many employers, acting on guidance from public health officials, have encouraged sick workers to return to their jobs after only five days, even without a test showing that they are negative for the virus.

“The confusion is compounded,” said Dr. Gill Wright, the city health director in Nashville. “People are saying, this is supposed to get really bad, but we can go back to work quicker?”

In rural Michigan, people with coronavirus symptoms have arrived at hospitals in recent weeks repeating the conventional wisdom that once you have had Covid, you are unlikely to contract it again quickly.

“A lot of them say, ‘It can’t be Covid, I just had it a few months ago,’” said Dr. Mark Hamed, an emergency room physician in Sandusky, Mich. “Lo and behold, they test positive.”

Roughly 62 percent of Americans are fully vaccinated, a number that has barely budged in recent weeks. Even fully vaccinated and boosted individuals have become infected with the Omicron variant, though health officials say that their infections appear less severe than in the unvaccinated.

Across the country, record numbers of public employees have been off the job as a result of surging coronavirus infections, leaving officials scrambling to reassure residents that if they call 911, someone will show up — if a little later than normal.

In Dallas, 204 of the roughly 2,100 employees of the city’s fire and rescue department were in quarantine on Thursday because of positive Covid-19 tests — the most since the beginning of the pandemic, according to Jason Evans, the department’s spokesman. He said that approximately one-quarter of the department’s total positive tests since March 2020 were from the last two weeks.

Los Angeles city officials said at a news conference on Thursday that almost 300 firefighters were off duty because of the virus, the most the department had seen at any one time. Jeff Cretan, a spokesman for Mayor London Breed of San Francisco, said that 140 employees of the fire department and 188 employees of the city police department had tested positive or were out because of quarantine protocols; so were 110 workers at the city’s transit agency.

Schools and colleges were facing the uncertainty of whether to conduct classes in person or virtually, sometimes while balancing competing arguments from parents, teachers and students.

In Chicago last week, the powerful teachers union and Mayor Lori Lightfoot clashed over coronavirus safety and testing in a dispute that has closed schools for several days in the nation’s third-largest school district.

At Rhodes College, a small liberal arts school in Memphis, officials announced over the holiday break that the start of in-person classes was being delayed two weeks — a disappointment for students exasperated with online classes and eager for the kind of college experience they had hoped for.

“Every semester, it feels like we’re almost back to normal and then it gets revoked one more time,” said John Howell, a senior political economy and philosophy major starting his final semester. “It feels like every routine is going to be broken and you should just expect that.”

Bishop James Dixon, the senior pastor at the Community of Faith Church in Houston, said that he and his fellow church leaders have found themselves struggling to strike the right balance as Omicron spreads.

“No one has a set answer,” he said. “It’s trial and error. It’s trepidation. And we’re supposed to be people of faith and make a decision and take a direction.”

	<p>Mr. Dixon said the virus had caused a scare among many congregants because they know so many people now who have gotten it.</p> <p>“Things are better than they were,” he said, “but simultaneously they’re worse than they were because numbers are soaring.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 King Co. declares emergency: winter storm
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/king-county-declares-emergency-over-flooding-ongoing-snowstorm-problems
GIST	<p>KING COUNTY, Wash. - King County Executive Dow Constantine issued an emergency declaration over flooding and winter storm complications.</p> <p>Constantine previously issued an emergency declaration on Dec. 28 2021, just days after a winter storm blasted the Pacific Northwest. Weather has largely remained dangerous since then, with icy roads, frequent heavy rains, strong winds and river and coastal flooding in the region.</p> <p>Area mountain passes have been so overwhelmed with snow, places like Snoqualmie Pass have been forced to close for the weekend.</p> <p>The county’s Emergency Operations Center is once again open to meet the needs of this civil emergency. Constantine’s declaration grants him powers to direct county personnel, services and equipment to where he wants.</p> <p>For the time being, Constantine’s declaration indicates a main priority is keeping major highways cleared, providing response and recovery services, and coordinating resources.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 National Guard to assist Leavenworth
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/leavenworth-declares-state-emergency/2JWTRAEXYRBV3EAFITMMTD35DI/
GIST	<p>LEAVENWORTH, Wash. — The National Guard will be deployed to the city of Leavenworth Monday after a state of emergency was declared Friday due to an unprecedented and record-breaking snowfall.</p> <p>Mayor Carl Florea requested assistance from the National Guard for welfare checks, food delivery, general snow cleanup and private driveway snow removal after the city received 36 inches of snow in under 24 hours Jan. 6.</p> <p>Some areas reportedly got up to 48 inches in 48 hours.</p> <p>Local contractors are providing emergency aid that includes snow storage and snow removal.</p> <p>Officials said some people were able to get out of their homes Saturday. However, it could be several days for others.</p> <p>Another issue, those visiting the city will not be able to leave until the pass opens.</p> <p>A city representative said there are concerns about supplies as the Safeway in the area ran out of gas. However, other gas stations reportedly had supplies.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 Covid hospitalizations rise in King Co.
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/covid-hospitalizations-surge-king-county-omicron/281-43823f4a-0e73-409d-8429-bb9f4a85b134

GIST	<p>SEATTLE — COVID-19 cases due to omicron are still surging, with King County predicting the peak to come mid-January.</p> <p>The rise in cases, meanwhile, is leading to an unprecedented strain in Washington hospitals.</p> <p>"Right now, we are closer to crisis situation than we ever have been," said Dr. John Lynch, who leads the clinical response to COVID-19 at the University of Washington Medicine.</p> <p>Meanwhile, in a briefing Friday, King County's health officer Dr. Jeff Duchin expressed that cases may get a lot worse before they get better.</p> <p>"The speed of spread of omicron has been mind-boggling," Duchin said.</p> <p>Duchin said as of Friday, there were 400 patients with COVID-19 in King County hospitals. That exceeds the past peak of 331 COVID-19 patients in hospitals in August 2021. It is the highest number the county has seen to date, according to Duchin.</p> <p>"We expect hospitalizations to continue to rise and healthcare systems stress to continue to increase for several weeks after cases peak," Duchin said.</p> <p>The Washington State Hospital Association led a briefing on Thursday, with the group's CEO, Cassie Sauer, pointing out the rise in cases come amid an already short-staffed workforce.</p> <p>"One thing that is new for us is that we have a lot of hospital staff who are sick, who have tested positive," Sauer said.</p> <p>Sauer also said delta cases are still an issue and compounding hospitalizations.</p> <p>Also in the briefing, Lynch said the numbers at UW Medicine hospitals are growing every day.</p> <p>For comparison, Lynch said there were 30 COVID-19 patients at UW Medicine hospitals during the weeks before the Christmas holiday. Today, that number is closer to 145.</p> <p>"Just to be clear, within UW Medicine facilities, this is the largest number of COVID-19 patients we've had in the entire two years," Lynch said.</p> <p>Overall in King County, the number of hospitalizations in the last seven days has increased to 71 percent, according to Lynch.</p> <p>Projections from the Washington Department of Health's hospital admission rate show an upward trend of COVID-19 hospitalizations statewide, with at least 1,200 COVID admissions leading into the new year.</p> <p>Duchin said there are strategies to prevent the rise in COVID-19 hospital visits and ways to protect oneself from omicron.</p> <p>He advised the public to avoid crowded, poorly ventilated spaces, wear a high-quality mask or respirator, isolate from others when sick, and get vaccinated and boosted.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 Omicron spurs breakdown of services
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/omicron-explosion-spurs-nationwide-breakdown-of-services/
GIST	Ambulances in Kansas speed toward hospitals then suddenly change direction because hospitals are full. Employee shortages in New York City cause delays in trash and subway services and diminish the ranks

of firefighters and emergency workers. Airport officials shut down security checkpoints at the biggest terminal in Phoenix and schools across the nation struggle to find teachers for their classrooms.

The current explosion of omicron-fueled coronavirus infections in the U.S. is causing a breakdown in basic functions and services — the latest illustration of how COVID-19 keeps upending life more than two years into the pandemic.

“This really does, I think, remind everyone of when COVID-19 first appeared and there were such major disruptions across every part of our normal life,” said Tom Cotter, director of emergency response and preparedness at the global health nonprofit Project HOPE. “And the unfortunate reality is, there’s no way of predicting what will happen next until we get our vaccination numbers — globally — up.”

First responders, hospitals, schools and government agencies have employed an all-hands-on-deck approach to keep the public safe, but they are worried how much longer they can keep it up.

In Kansas’ Johnson County, paramedics are working 80 hours a week. Ambulances have frequently been forced to alter their course when the hospitals they’re heading to tell them they’re too overwhelmed to help, confusing the patients’ already anxious family members driving behind them. When the ambulances arrive at hospitals, some of their emergency patients end up in waiting rooms because there are no beds.

Dr. Steve Stites, chief medical officer for the University of Kansas Hospital, said when the leader of a rural hospital had no place to send its dialysis patients this week, the hospital’s staff consulted a textbook and “tried to put in some catheters and figure out how to do it.”

Medical facilities have been hit by a “double whammy,” he said. The number of COVID-19 patients at the University of Kansas Hospital rose from 40 on Dec. 1 to 139 on Friday. At the same time, more than 900 employees have been sickened with COVID-19 or are awaiting test results — 7% of the hospital’s 13,500-person workforce.

“What my hope is and what we’re going to cross our fingers around is that as it peaks ... maybe it’ll have the same rapid fall we saw in South Africa,” Stites said, referring to the swiftness with which the number of cases fell in that country. “We don’t know that. That’s just hope.”

The omicron variant spreads even more easily than other coronavirus strains, and has already become dominant in many countries. It also more readily infects those who have been vaccinated or had previously been infected by prior versions of the virus. However, early studies show omicron is less likely to cause severe illness than the previous delta variant, and vaccination and a booster still offer strong protection from serious illness, hospitalization and death.

Still, its easy transmissibility has led to skyrocketing cases in the U.S., which is affecting businesses, government offices and public services alike.

In downtown Boise, Idaho, customers were queued up outside a pharmacy before it opened Friday morning and before long, the line wound throughout the large drugstore. Pharmacies have been slammed by staffing shortages, either because employees are out sick or have left altogether.

Pharmacy technician Anecia Mascorro said that prior to the pandemic, the Sav-On Pharmacy where she works always had prescriptions ready for the next day. Now, it’s taking a lot longer to fill the hundreds of orders that are pouring in.

“The demand is crazy — everybody’s not getting their scripts fast enough so they keep transferring to us,” Mascorro said.

In Los Angeles, more than 800 police and fire personnel were sidelined because of the virus as of Thursday, causing slightly longer ambulance and fire response times.

In New York City, officials have had to delay or scale back trash and subway services because of a virus-fueled staffing hemorrhage. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority said about one-fifth of subway operators and conductors — 1,300 people — have been absent in recent days. Almost one-fourth of the city sanitation department's workers were out sick Thursday, Sanitation Commissioner Edward Grayson said.

"Everybody's working 'round the clock, 12-hour shifts," Grayson said.

The city's fire department also has adjusted for higher absences. Officials said Thursday that 28% of EMS workers were out sick, compared with about 8% to 10% on a normal day. Twice as many firefighters as usual were also absent.

In contrast, the police department saw its sick rate fall over the past week, officials said.

At Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport, two checkpoints at the airport's busiest terminal were shut down because not enough Transportation Security Administration agents showed up for work, according to statements from airport and TSA officials.

Meanwhile, schools from coast to coast tried to maintain in-person instruction despite massive teacher absences. In Chicago, a tense standoff between the school district and teachers union over remote learning and COVID-19 safety protocols led to classes being canceled over the past three days. In San Francisco, nearly 900 educators and aides called in sick Thursday.

In Hawaii, where public schools are under one statewide district, 1,600 teachers and staff were absent Wednesday because of illness or pre-arranged vacation or leave. The state's teachers union criticized education officials for not better preparing for the ensuing void. Osa Tui Jr., head of the Hawaii State Teachers Association, said counselors and security guards were being pulled to go "babysit a classroom."

"That is very inappropriate," Tui said at a news conference. "To have this model where there are so many teachers out and for the department to say, 'Send your kid' to a classroom that doesn't have a teacher, what's the point of that?"

In New Haven, Connecticut, where hundreds of teachers have been out each day this week, administrators have helped to cover classrooms. Some teachers say they appreciate that, but that it can be confusing for students, adding to the physical and mental stress they're already feeling because of the pandemic.

"We've already been tested so much. How much can the rubber band stretch here?" asked Leslie Blatteau, president of the New Haven Federation of Teachers.

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HEADLINE	01/08 UW professors choose: remote or in-class
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/education/uw-professors-allowed-to-choose-remote-learning-due-to-covid-cases/
GIST	<p>Professors at the University of Washington may choose to conduct their classes remotely until Jan. 28, President Ana Mari Cauce said in a new letter to students and staff. The increased flexibility is a response to the ballooning number of omicron-driven COVID-19 cases in King County, the state and the country.</p> <p>Professors who do choose to conduct in-person classes must accommodate students participating remotely, said Cauce. Practicums, lab-based and clinical instruction should be prioritized for in-person learning.</p> <p>"This flexibility will help manage various Omicron-related disruptions, including increased numbers of student absences," said Cauce.</p> <p>Friday's announcement highlights the highly fluid and unpredictable environment surrounding coronavirus infections, especially since the omicron variant became dominant. After conducting all classes remotely in</p>

the 2020-21 school year, the university cautiously returned to traditional instruction in the fall. But as case counts climbed, the UW announced in December it would return to [remote learning for the first week of the new year](#).

Since then, COVID infections have reached their highest number since the beginning of the pandemic, shattering records previously set by the delta variant. King County is now averaging over 3,000 cases a day and saw more than 5,000 cases reported on some days this week. Hospitalizations and deaths are climbing as well.

“Over the course of the week, we have continued to monitor the spread of the Omicron variant in our region and the challenges it is causing, which include significant stress on our health-care system and increased cases and positivity rates in our University community,” Cauce wrote.

Cauce encouraged students and staff to wear well-fitting masks, test when symptomatic and get vaccinated and boosted.

Washington State University is planning to [continue in-person instruction](#), officials said at a town hall meeting Thursday. Western Washington University began courses remotely last week and is scheduled to return to in-person classes Monday.

A snowstorm and four pass closures last week caused WSU to cancel classes this Monday and Tuesday, so students would have ample time to return to Pullman. As of mid-day Saturday, a WSU update held to that timeline, while state road workers were striving to reopen Snoqualmie Pass sometime Sunday.

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HEADLINE	01/08 Britain 7 th country surpass 150,000 deaths
SOURCE	https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2022/01/08/britain-reports-150000-deaths-covid/4321641668972/
GIST	<p>Jan. 8 (UPI) -- The British government reported that more than 150,057 people have died from COVID-19 within 28 days of testing positive for the virus after 313 new deaths were recorded Saturday.</p> <p>Prime Minister Boris Johnson said in a statement that the coronavirus pandemic has "taken a terrible toll" on the country and encouraged people to get vaccinated with booster doses.</p> <p>"Each and every one of those is a profound loss to the families, friends and communities affected, and my thoughts and condolences are with them," Johnson said. "Our way out of this pandemic is for everyone to get their booster or their first or second dose if they haven't yet."</p> <p>The government counts coronavirus deaths with two measures: those who tested positive for the illness within four weeks of their death and those whose death certificates list COVID-19 as their cause of death even if they had not tested for the virus before dying.</p> <p>There have been 173,248 deaths attributed to COVID-19 on death certificates in the country as of Dec. 24, the data shows.</p> <p>Britain is the seventh country to pass 150,000 reported deaths, according to the World Health Organization. The United States has seen the greatest number of deaths during the pandemic, with 826,022 -- followed by Brazil with 619,513 deaths, India with 483,178 deaths, Russia with 314,604 deaths, Mexico with 299,842 deaths and Peru with 202,904 deaths.</p> <p>Britain recorded 146,390 cases of the coronavirus on Saturday as the highly transmissible Omicron variant surges through the country, increasing the number of hospital admissions and deaths despite being considered less severe than previous variants.</p> <p>Health experts have recommended receiving a third booster dose of the vaccine in order to protect against the Omicron variant. Britain has administered 35.27 million booster doses as of Saturday.</p>

	<p>However, British government advisers recommended Friday against giving fourth doses of a vaccine to the elderly and instead focus priorities on getting the majority of the population in all age groups to receive the third shot.</p> <p>"The current data shows the booster dose is continuing to provide high levels of protection against severe disease, even for the most vulnerable older age groups," said Wei Shen Lim, chair of COVID-19 immunization for the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunization.</p> <p>"For this reason, the committee has concluded there is no immediate need to introduce a second booster dose, though this will continue to be reviewed."</p> <p>The advisers recommended that all unvaccinated people come forward to receive their first two doses of the vaccine "as soon as possible."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 Ethiopia releases opposition figures
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/ethiopia-releases-opposition-figures-as-it-seeks-end-to-war-11641658776?mod=hp_listb_pos1
GIST	<p>Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed freed several opposition figures from prison and pledged to open dialogue with political opponents after 14 months of war that has threatened to tear apart Africa's second-most populous nation.</p> <p>The surprise amnesty, announced by Mr. Ahmed in a televised speech on Friday, came after days of a lull in fighting with the rebellious region of Tigray. A government offensive has resulted in the capture of swaths of territory and several towns from the rebels since December.</p> <p>Among the opposition figures freed are Sebhat Nega, the founder of the Tigray People's Liberation Front, and Abay Weldu, the former president of Tigray, a state that has been fighting Mr. Ahmed's government since late 2020.</p> <p>Thousands of people have been killed in the conflict and two million others have been forced from their homes. Other key figures freed include opposition leaders Jawar Mohammed and Eskinder Nega.</p> <p>The amnesty marks a significant development in a conflict that has threatened to splinter a key ally in the U.S.'s antiterrorism operations in the region. Fighting has raged across northern Ethiopia since Mr. Ahmed ordered an offensive in response to an attack by TPLF forces on a government military base in November 2020.</p> <p>"The key to lasting peace is dialogue," Ethiopia's communications office said in a statement. "Its purpose is to pave the way for a lasting solution to Ethiopia's problems in a peaceful, nonviolent way."</p> <p>The pardons came a day after Washington's departing envoy for the Horn of Africa, Jeffrey Feltman, met with Mr. Ahmed to press for a negotiated end to the conflict. The U.S. scrapped Ethiopia from its trade program in November, citing the country's failure to end the conflict.</p> <p>While announcing the pardons, Mr. Ahmed said that his government's intention was to achieve national reconciliation and promote unity. But Mr. Ahmed made no mention of negotiations with the TPLF rebels, who have in recent weeks indicated a willingness to negotiate with the government.</p> <p>While Ethiopian forces have driven Tigrayan fighters from the neighboring states of Amhara and Afar, there has been sporadic fighting, including a spate of drone strikes. The United Nations said in December that airstrikes had killed dozens of civilians between Dec. 19 and 24.</p>

	<p>The rebels had advanced within 200 miles of Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, in December before being beaten back following a rapid government offensive, backed by armed drones.</p> <p>A rebel spokesman accused the government of continuing to target civilians and blocking the entry of aid in the region. The government denies the accusations.</p> <p>Some analysts believe that Mr. Ahmed, who won a Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for brokering a truce to end a three-decade conflict with Eritrea, appears to be taking steps toward a negotiated end to the conflict to redeem his tainted image.</p> <p>“The conflict has severely damaged Abiy’s reputation among Western powers and historical allies,” said Zaynab Mohamed, an analyst at Oxford Economics Africa. “We expect the security situation to remain volatile until a formal commitment to peace negotiations has been made.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Hurricanes to be more common Northeast?
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/hurricanes-may-become-more-common-in-northeastern-u-s-bringing-new-risk-to-major-cities-11641724205?mod=hp_lead_pos8
GIST	<p>When Hurricane Sandy made landfall near New York City almost a decade ago, bringing huge storm surges and 7 inches of rain that caused widespread flooding and blackouts, the superstorm was seen as an exceedingly rare event. Though common in regions closer to the equator, including the Caribbean and along the Gulf Coast, such storms rarely make direct strikes on the northeastern U.S.</p> <p>But a new study suggests that as the planet warms, the storms will become more common in mid-latitude regions—between 30 and 60 degrees latitude in both hemispheres—that include New York City and Boston as well as Beijing, Tokyo and other large cities in eastern Asia and Australia.</p> <p>“Places like New York, which are not in the deep tropics, have always had hurricanes, but only rarely,” said Joshua Studholme, a Yale University climate physicist and the lead author of the study, published last month in the journal Nature Geoscience. “The climatology is changing and that is likely to be a shock.”</p> <p>An expanding hurricane range means more people as well as homes and businesses may be at risk in coastal areas, said Jim Kossin, a former National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration scientist who wasn’t involved in the new research.</p> <p>The equatorial region that gives rise to tropical cyclones—known as hurricanes in the Atlantic and typhoons in the western Pacific—will likely expand toward both poles as meteorological conditions conducive to tropical-cyclone formation there become more common.</p> <p>“Even a small poleward shift in the average latitude where tropical cyclones track can cause very large changes in exposure at higher latitudes,” said Dr. Kossin, who now works for The Climate Service, a climate-risk analysis company.</p> <p>Hurricanes typically develop in regions where prevailing winds are light and the ocean surface temperature is above 80 degrees Fahrenheit. Such conditions are common in tropical regions but have been less so farther from the equator and closer to the poles. As global temperatures rise, however, the jet streams—westerly bands of fast winds that circle up to 9 miles above the Earth—are weakening and shifting in mid-latitude regions. That allows hurricanes and typhoons to form across a wider range.</p> <p>Over the past 170 years, average global temperatures have risen two degrees Fahrenheit, according to a report issued in August by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The report said temperatures would continue to rise by at least 0.7 degrees by 2100, attributing the phenomenon to greenhouse gas emissions “unequivocally caused by human activities,” including the burning of fossil fuels.</p>

The last time hurricanes formed at higher latitudes was during the Pliocene epoch, a period between 5.3 million and 2.6 million years ago marked by high temperatures and high levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide, according to the study.

“The tropical cyclones of the 21st century will most probably occupy a wider range of latitudes than at any time during the last three million years,” Dr. Studholme said.

His group based the research on [satellite observations of current weather](#) as well as simulations of Earth’s past and projections of future weather. Such simulations have limitations, in part because they rely on incomplete data describing how the climate behaved in the past to project future patterns.

“It is very difficult to verify a climate model specifically for long-term multi-decadal changes in global tropical cyclones because of the uncertainty in observations,” said Hiroyuki Murakami, a project scientist with NOAA’s Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory who wasn’t involved in the study. But, he added, it was “reasonable to infer the possible poleward shift in tropical cyclone latitudes in the future” based on the study.

In light of the potential threat, some cities aren’t waiting for precise information.

Last year, New York City Emergency Management updated the city’s coastal-storm plan, using new data to more accurately define areas most at risk of hurricane-related flooding and changing the boundaries of the city’s six hurricane evacuation zones accordingly.

The agency “continues to educate and prepare New Yorkers for the potential impacts of hurricanes, as climate change has increased their frequency and intensity,” it said in a statement.

Boston is expanding efforts to prepare for a potentially wet and stormy future, in part by revamping waterfront parks with berms and flood walls to better manage rising waters, and building a new waterfront park designed to withstand hurricanes and catastrophic flooding, according to Rev. Mariama White-Hammond, the city’s chief of Environment, Energy and Open Spaces.

“With hurricanes, we don’t know how and when, but we already know where our low-lying areas are,” she said. “We know enough to act.”

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HEADLINE	01/09 Labs limit test access as demand soars
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/labs-limit-covid-19-test-access-as-demand-soars-11641724202?mod=hp_lead_pos7
GIST	<p>Escalating demand for Covid-19 tests is prompting some laboratories to ration access, giving priority to people with symptoms or other health concerns as the Omicron variant quickly spreads.</p> <p>Triaging who is eligible for Covid-19 tests can help ensure that patients who need a test the most get results fast enough to isolate or get treatment, pathologists and public-health experts say. The strategy, however, risks perpetuating the virus’s spread if some people get turned away from testing altogether.</p> <p>“What we don’t want is for people to not be able to get tested in the community and then show up at the ER to get testing,” said Melissa Miller, director of the University of North Carolina’s microbiology lab. “But there is a maximum amount that you can collect in a day.”</p> <p>UNC is restricting tests to people with Covid-19 symptoms, employees and patients who need a test before surgeries. Dr. Miller said UNC is running about 1,200 tests a day and returning results to patients within 24 hours. About a third of the tests are coming back positive, she said.</p> <p>The University of Washington temporarily closed some of its testing sites on Tuesday and is giving appointment priority to people with Covid-19 symptoms or a known exposure. The turnaround time for</p>

test results had stretched past two days, beyond the university's 24-hour goal, said Geoffrey Baird, UW Medicine's acting chair of Laboratory Medicine and Pathology, at a Dec. 30 media briefing.

"A Covid test that is not back for several days, it just isn't terribly meaningful because someone could go on and spread the virus," Dr. Baird said.

Dr. Baird also said the proportion of test results coming back positive is too high to take advantage of a common resource-saving technique. UW Medicine often uses a single test on multiple patient samples at once, a process called pooling, which saves time and resources when most samples are negative. But pooling doesn't work if too many samples are positive because lab workers often have to retest the batches to find the positive results.

For pooling to be effective, the positivity rate needs to be as low as 10% to 15%, Dr. Baird said. At UW Medicine, the overall positivity rate was about 25%, with some sites exceeding 40%, around Dec. 30 and continues to increase. "We can't do pooling anymore, and what it does is it really decreases our capacity," Dr. Baird said.

The Carle Foundation Hospital Laboratory in Illinois ran about 13,000 Covid-19 PCR tests within the week ending Jan. 1, up from about 6,700 at the beginning of November. The lab could run around 18,000 tests a week [if it had enough staff](#) and supplies, said Bruce Wellman, a pathologist. The lab recognizes it could need a triage strategy for its drive-through sites if demand outpaces capacity, Dr. Wellman said.

"We've got the choice of delayed results, which have no value, versus timely, immediate results, which do have value," he said.

Even before the Omicron wave put many people out sick or into quarantine, [laboratories were chronically understaffed](#) and heading into their third year of pandemic operations.

"There are a finite number of people who do laboratory testing. It's not an endless resource," said Emily Volk, president of the College of American Pathologists.

Dr. Volk said that staff at Baptist Health Floyd in Indiana, where she is chief medical officer, worked over the holidays to process tests and that processing time for samples remained low. Many hospital and commercial labs are running around the clock, with staff there to process samples at all hours.

Testing materials including reagents and swabs are more readily available than earlier in the pandemic, Dr. Volk and other diagnostic experts said. But some labs have started to report challenges in getting materials in recent days because of increased demand.

Laboratories in the U.S. [were processing about 1.7 million Covid-19 tests](#) a day as of Jan. 3, according to federal data, comparable to the number processed during last winter's surge.

Many mass-testing sites were closed or converted into vaccination sites within the past year. Fewer locations and staff for collecting samples have contributed to hourslong lines and limited testing appointments across the country.

Some states and cities [have established new sites](#) in recent weeks and federal officials said last week that they would add locations in several states and Washington, D.C. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said laboratories that can help collect samples or conduct drive-through testing should contact local health officials.

Some laboratories say they are still processing PCR tests in one to two days, including [Laboratory Corp. of America Holdings](#). [Quest Diagnostics](#) Inc. on Tuesday said it expected turnaround times of two to three days, up from a day. The company is using its own air fleet and logistics network to balance sample volume across two dozen Covid-19 testing labs and is sending some excess samples to external laboratories.

	<p>CityMD, which operates urgent-care centers throughout New York and New Jersey, said it is averaging five to seven days to deliver PCR test results and has temporarily closed more than 30 of its 150 locations because of staffing concerns. CityMD said it plans to reopen 12 sites on Monday and then more on Jan. 17, contingent on availability of workers.</p> <p>Over-the-counter, at-home tests have helped ease pressure on laboratories, but they have been in short supply. The Indiana Department of Health said Tuesday that rapid tests at state and local sites would only be available to people under age 18 or symptomatic adults 50 and older as a result of high demand and a national shortage. PCR tests are still available at all sites, the department said, with results expected in two to three days.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 France: anti-vaccine protesters rally
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/08/well-piss-you-off-french-anti-vaccine-protesters-rally-against-macron
GIST	<p>Anti-vaccine protesters rallied in cities across France on Saturday, denouncing President Emmanuel Macron's intent to "piss off" people refusing Covid-19 shots by tightening curbs on their civil liberties.</p> <p>Macron said this week he wanted to irritate unvaccinated people by making their lives so complicated they would end up getting jabbed. Unvaccinated people were irresponsible and unworthy of being considered citizens, he added.</p> <p>In Paris, protesters retorted by adopting his slangy wording, chanting "We'll piss you off".</p> <p>Others carried signs saying "No to the vaccine pass", a reference to Macron's legislative push to require proof of vaccination to enter venues such as cafes, bars and museums.</p> <p>TV images showed skirmishes between protesters and police at one site. Protesters also rallied through the streets in Marseille, Nantes and Le Mans among other cities.</p> <p>"[Macron's remarks] were the last straw. We are not irresponsible," said hospital administrator Virginie Houget, who has avoided a mandatory vaccine order for health workers because she caught Covid-19 late last year.</p> <p>The protesters accuse Macron of trampling on their freedoms and treating citizens unequally. He says freedoms carry responsibilities that include protecting the health of others.</p> <p>France recorded more than 300,000 new coronavirus infections for the second time in a week on Friday. Hospitalisations, including Covid-19 patients in intensive care (ICU), are rising steadily, putting the healthcare system under strain.</p> <p>Some hospitals have reported that 85% of ICU patients are not vaccinated against Covid-19. Data shows that 90% of over-12s eligible for the Covid shot are fully vaccinated.</p> <p>People in France already have to show either proof of vaccination or a negative test to enter restaurants and bars and use inter-regional trains. But with Omicron infections surging, the government wants to drop the test option.</p> <p>Three months before a presidential election, Macron's blunt language appeared to be calculated, tapping into a mounting frustration against the unvaccinated.</p> <p>Conservative challenger Valérie Pécresse said Macron was driving a wedge through the country. Far-right candidate Éric Zemmour denounced what he called the president's puerile remarks.</p>

	<p>On the capital's streets, protesters accused Macron of politicising the pandemic in the run-up to the election.</p> <p>"I want him to piss off drug dealers and criminals, not the average person," said one 55-year-old protester who requested anonymity because he runs a business.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 China to test 14M after 20 tested positive
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/09/chinese-city-of-tianjin-to-test-14-million-people-after-covid-outbreak
GIST	<p>Tianjin, a major Chinese port city near the capital Beijing, has begun mass-testing its 14 million residents after a cluster of 20 children and adults tested positive for Covid-19, including at least two with the Omicron variant.</p> <p>Those infected include 15 students aged between eight and 13, a staff member at an after-school centre and four parents. The citywide testing, begun on Sunday, is to be completed over two days.</p> <p>The first two cases confirmed in Tianjin were a 10-year-old girl and a 29-year-old woman working at the after-school centre. Both were infected by the Omicron variant. In subsequent testing of close contacts, 18 others tested positive and 767 tested negative as of Saturday night.</p> <p>Residents have been advised to stay at or near home to be available for the community-level nucleic-acid screening. They have been told that until they obtain a negative test result, they will not receive a "green" code on smartphone Covid-tracing apps that nearly all people in China are now required to present when using public transport and in other situations.</p> <p>China has stepped up its zero-tolerance Covid-19 strategy in the run-up to the Winter Olympics, which open on 4 February in Beijing. The Chinese capital is 150km (90 miles) north-west of Tianjin and connected by a high-speed rail link that takes less than one hour.</p> <p>Millions of people are being confined to their homes in Xi'an and Yuzhou, two other cities that are farther away but have larger outbreaks. The city of Zhengzhou, a provincial capital 70km (40 miles) north of Yuzhou, is also conducting mass testing and closing schools starting Monday.</p> <p>China reported 165 confirmed coronavirus cases for 8 January, up from 159 a day earlier, its health authority said on Sunday.</p> <p>Of the new infections, 92 were locally transmitted, according to a statement by the National Health Commission, from 95 a day earlier. Most of the new local cases were in the provinces of Henan, home to Yuzhou, and Shaanxi, home to Xi'an.</p> <p>China reported 46 new asymptomatic cases, which it classifies separately from confirmed cases, compared with 52 a day earlier. There were no new fatalities, leaving the death toll at 4,636. Mainland China had 103,619 confirmed cases as of 8 January.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 UK health advisers: 3 shots enough for now
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/8/uk-health-advisers-say-3-jabs-enough-now/
GIST	<p>U.K. government advisers say a fourth COVID jab is not needed at this time.</p> <p>The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunization advised the U.K. government on Friday that a third dose of the vaccine, or booster shot, offers ample protection against hospitalization.</p>

	<p>“The current data show the booster dose is continuing to provide high levels of protection against severe disease, even for the most vulnerable older age groups,” said Wei Shen Lim, the committee’s chair, according to the Associated Press. “For this reason, the committee has concluded there is no immediate need to introduce a second booster dose, though this will continue to be reviewed.”</p> <p>U.K. Health Security Agency data demonstrates that people over 65 enjoy close to 90% protection against hospitalization three months after the third dose.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/07 Data: nearly 2 in 3 vaccinated w/out booster
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/7/only-35-vaccinated-americans-have-sought-boosters-/
GIST	<p>Nearly two in three vaccinated Americans haven’t received a COVID-19 booster despite President Biden’s repeated push to shore up waning protection and fend off the omicron variant that’s blanketed the country, raising questions about public enthusiasm for more shots.</p> <p>About 73 million people, or 35% of the 207 million people who’ve received a primary vaccine series, have received a booster, according to federal data.</p> <p>Teens ages 16 and 17 were made eligible for boosters in early December and those 12 and up joined them in recent days, and some people are not distanced a sufficient number of months from their initial shots.</p> <p>But adults have been cleared for a third shot since mid-November. Fewer than four in 10 Americans over age 18 have come forward, forcing Biden officials to amplify their pleas to a pandemic-weary public while Israeli officials move to the fourth round of shots for vulnerable residents.</p> <p>“Right now, I think our strategy has to be to maximize the protection of the tens of millions who continue to be eligible for a third shot before we start thinking about a fourth shot,” Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said Friday.</p> <p>Doctors said they’re seeing the impact of slow uptake in the field, as the omicron variant rips through communities and preys on people with less protection.</p> <p>“Patients without vaccines are making up a significant portion of the ICU beds, fighting for their lives,” said Panagis Galiatsatos, an assistant professor at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore.</p> <p>“After that is a small group of vaccinated and not boosted,” he said, adding that people in this group tend to be farther than six months from their primary series and thus eligible. He said many of these patients did not realize they are candidates for boosting, and that changing the definition of fully vaccinated might help with awareness.</p> <p>Biden officials say they’ve been explicit about the need to get boosted, even as they’ve resisted calls to update the definition of fully vaccinated from two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines or one shot of the Johnson & Johnson version.</p> <p>Workplace COVID-19 mandates and some rules around vaccination and entry to public venues are typically pegged to the existing definition of fully vaccinated.</p> <p>“Individuals are considered fully vaccinated against COVID-19 if they’ve received their primary series. That definition is not changing,” Dr. Walensky said Wednesday at a White House COVID-19 briefing, adding: “We are now recommending that individuals stay up to date with additional doses that they are eligible for.”</p> <p>Former CDC Director Tom Frieden, who served under former President Barack Obama, said the last part of Dr. Walensky’s comment will be key.</p>

“We need to change the wording that we’re using for vaccination to being ‘up to date.’ We’re familiar with that concept for our kids’ vaccinations — up to date,” Dr. Frieden told The Washington Times. “The virus is changing, the science is changing, we are learning more all the time. And as we learn more, people may need more vaccinations, different vaccinations, no more vaccinations — but I think we need to encourage everyone to stay up to date with their COVID vaccination.”

Claire Hannan, executive director of the Association of Immunization Managers, said booster uptake might be lagging because of a combination of factors. There has been so much focus on immunizing children and adult holdouts with a primary series, there are staffing shortages at some pharmacies, doctor’s offices and health systems — especially as they focus on testing and care for COVID cases — and some places are generally seeing slow demand.

“Historically, uptake for second doses and boosters doses generally declines compared to initial doses,” she said, referring to other vaccines that require multiple doses at intervals.

Booster uptake can vary widely within a single state.

CalMatters, a nonprofit news site in California, said the state has a 38% boost rate overall, but far-northern counties and rural areas are seeing rates as low as 23%, while the Bay Area has boosted over half of its vaccinated persons, at about 55%.

One key factor in booster uptake is timing. Some people aren’t far enough from their initial series to be eligible for an extra dose.

The CDC and Food and Drug Administration this month tried to herd more people into the boosted column, saying people who received the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines can seek a booster after five months instead of six. Slightly more than 166 million Americans — amounting to 51% of the population — were fully vaccinated as of Aug. 7.

“The country is in the middle of a wave of the highly contagious omicron variant, which spreads more rapidly than the original [coronavirus strain] and other variants that have emerged,” said Peter Marks, director of the FDA’s Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research, on Friday. “Vaccination is our best defense against COVID-19, including the circulating variants, and shortening the length of time between completion of a primary series and a booster dose may help reduce waning immunity.”

The administration has pointed to better rates among older Americans, who are more susceptible to COVID-19 disease and are more likely to be farther out from their initial vaccine series. Nearly 6 in 10 persons aged 65 or older have gotten a booster, while around half of persons 50 or older have come forward.

Mr. Biden this past week pleaded with Americans of all ages to warm to boosters.

Extra shots “significantly increase the protection. They provide the highest level of protection against omicron,” the president said. “Americans, we’ve given out over 70 million booster shots. Importantly, two out of three eligible seniors have received their booster shots. Booster shots are free, they’re safe and available in over 90,000 vaccination sites. Let me say that again: They’re free, available, and at over 90,000 sites.”

Paul Mango, a key liaison between the Department of Health and Human Services and “Operation Warp Speed” in the Trump administration, said many younger, healthier people probably believe the primary series is good enough to stave off the most severe outcomes from COVID-19.

“I think most people have done the risk-benefit analysis and they said, ‘I’ll be fine,’” he said.

Mr. Mango also said the president did himself no favors by announcing a booster campaign in August before regulators and their advisers had a chance to weigh in on the plan.

	“He’s out in front of the FDA,” Mr. Mango said. “Big problem.”
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HEADLINE	01/08 Gas prices inch up over Covid uncertainty
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/8/gas-prices-rise-across-nation-dip-in-nj-amid-covid/
GIST	<p>TRENTON, N.J. (AP) — Gas prices rose across the nation but dipped in New Jersey amid fears about the possible effect of COVID-19’s omicron variant on the economy.</p> <p>AAA Mid-Atlantic says the average price of a gallon of regular gas in New Jersey on Friday was \$3.38, down a penny from last week. Drivers were paying an average of \$2.42 a gallon a year ago at this time.</p> <p>The national average price for a gallon of regular gasoline was \$3.39, up two cents from last week. Drivers were paying \$2.28 a gallon on average a year ago at this time.</p> <p>Tracy Noble, spokesperson for AAA Mid-Atlantic, says there is great uncertainty about whether the omicron variant will linger or peak quickly and vanish, “and we are seeing this reflected at the pump in the form of uneasy price stability.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 Iran imposes sanctions 51 Americans
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/8/iran-imposes-sanctions-americans-over-2020-soleima/
GIST	<p>Iran on Saturday announced sanctions against 51 Americans over the U.S. strike that killed Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force Commander, General Qasem Soleimani.</p> <p>Iran’s Foreign Ministry cited the Americans for “glorification of terrorism” and for violating “fundamental human rights” as they announced the sanctions on the heels of the second anniversary of the January 2020 strike that killed Soleimani in Baghdad.</p> <p>“The said persons, as the case may be, have taken part in decision-making, organizing, financing, and carrying out the terrorist act or have otherwise justified terrorism which is a threat to the international peace and security through supporting such egregious terrorist attack,” the Iranian Foreign Ministry said in a statement.</p> <p>The U.S. strike on Soleimani came days after Iranian-backed militia members stormed the U.S. embassy in Iraq.</p> <p>The measure announced Saturday would permit Iranian authorities to seize any assets held in Iran. The individuals named are unlikely to be impacted by the move.</p> <p>In a similar move following the first anniversary of the strike, Iran blacklisted former President Donald Trump, who ordered the fatal strike, and senior members of his administration including former Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper among others.</p> <p>Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said earlier this week that Mr. Trump must face a trial for the killing, or Iran would seek revenge.</p> <p>Iranian officials expanded the list this year to include Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark A. Milley and former White House national security adviser Robert O’Brien.</p> <p>Nikki Haley, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations under the Trump administration, called the sanctions a “badge of honor.”</p> <p>“When you get sanctioned by Iran, the world’s leading state sponsor of terror, you know you’re doing something right,” she wrote on Twitter Saturday.</p>

	<p>During Mrs. Haley’s tenure as ambassador, the Trump administration withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran over Iranian weapons violations and reimposed sweeping sanctions against Iranian officials and companies that had been lifted under the Obama-era agreement.</p> <p>The U.S. is currently engaged in indirect talks with Iran to reenter a deal similar to the 2015 agreement.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/07 Omicron disrupts global vaccine supply
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/01/07/vaccine-global-supply-boosters/
GIST	<p>The omicron variant is scrambling the outlook for global coronavirus vaccine supply in 2022, increasing pressure on vaccine manufacturers to accelerate production to meet surging demand for booster shots and close the gap between rich and poor nations.</p> <p>Spiking demand for boosters in wealthy countries — especially for Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, which are considered the most effective vaccines — will make it all the more difficult for the global south to catch up to wealthier nations any time soon, advocates and experts said.</p> <p>And yet the large numbers of people in the developing world who remain unvaccinated make it all the more likely that the coronavirus can mutate and develop new variants, they said.</p> <p>“We’re already seeing countries change approach to their booster rollout. That takes a toll on current supply,” said Louise Blair, lead analyst at Airfinity, a British consulting firm that closely tracks manufacturing data.</p> <p>The pharmaceutical industry trade group, PhRMA, has pointed to overall global supply of vaccines as a sign of international success. As of Jan. 3, 9.2 billion shots have been given worldwide.</p> <p>But global health experts say far more shots are required.</p> <p>Giving 70 percent of the world’s 8 billion people two shots will require 11 billion shots. Adding a third shot or booster pushes that target to at least 16 billion shots. Moreover, not all shots provide a strong response, particularly against omicron.</p> <p>Nearly half of all global vaccinations delivered so far are made by Chinese manufacturers. Those shots — Sinovac and Sinopharm — are proving to be much less effective than Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna’s mRNA vaccines against the new variant.</p> <p>Because other shots provide less protection, a consortium of advocates and academics on Wednesday said the world needs 22 billion shots of mRNA vaccines in 2022 to stem the pandemic — a threshold that is not achievable under current projections.</p> <p>“We’re in for a rough road,” said C. Sola Olopade, a physician, dean of academic affairs and director of international programs at the University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine. “As long as there is this disparity and inequity in being able to vaccinate the whole world, we all are not going to be safe, because this virus is going to keep mutating and we won’t be able to predict how dangerous the next mutant is going to be.”</p> <p>Vaccine makers, which developed shots in record time, have registered mixed results in efforts to meet the challenge.</p> <p>Among U.S. manufacturers, Pfizer produced 3 billion shots and plans to build on its know-how and raw materials advantages to boost supply to 4 billion doses in 2022.</p>

It has committed to selling 1 billion discounted shots to the U.S. government for donation to disadvantaged nations.

The company has said it expected \$36 billion in coronavirus vaccine sales in 2021 and \$29 billion in 2022, a number that was based on contracts for this year as of mid-October.

But the challenges of distributing Pfizer's vaccine in remote areas are significant, said logistics experts. Its vaccine requires ultracold freezers, making it difficult to transport to rural areas of the developing world that lack hospitals and electricity.

The charitable arm of United Parcel Service, the UPS Foundation, has donated 25 million doses of vaccine to 18 countries, as well as 250 ultracold freezers that keep the Pfizer vaccine at the required negative-90-to-60 degrees Celsius. It also has donated smaller freezer packs that can be placed on trucks for delivery into areas without electricity.

"The biggest problem right now, the biggest point of friction, is the ultracold infrastructure," said Michael Shiffler, CEO of Red Lightning, a nonprofit logistics operation working with UPS and training health officials on the special handling demands in places such as Malawi and Indonesia.

"Pfizer is really critical right now because of the sheer volume it is producing," he said. "But if you want to store Pfizer for any given period of time, you need to have ultracold storage. And the vast majority of African countries do not have ultracold freezers."

Moderna and Johnson & Johnson have shots better suited for rigorous conditions, but those companies wrapped up 2021 well short of their publicly stated production goals.

Moderna downgraded its 2021 production goal to 700 million to 800 million from 1 billion. While most of Moderna's supply has been sold to wealthy countries, it has struck deals to deliver more vaccine to the developing world via the Covax international collaborative in 2022.

Moderna never sold a product before its coronavirus vaccine. It has said it expects to post \$15 billion to \$18 billion in vaccine sales for 2021.

The company has faced intense political criticism for not doing more to supply vaccine for the world, despite its taxpayer subsidies and partnership with the government. The company has resisted repeated calls to share its technology with developing nations so its vaccine could be produced outside of its own limited production line. It also has [disputed U.S. government patent rights](#) to its vaccine, even though it worked closely with National Institutes of Health scientists to invent key ingredients. That dispute is currently on pause.

The company has not provided explanations for why its production plateaued in late spring of 2021, while Pfizer ramped up much faster to a larger volume. Moderna, a start-up biotech company with no major manufacturing experience, has relied on a contract manufacturer, Lonza, to make much of its vaccine.

Pfizer has leveraged its deep experience and multinational footprint to accelerate, including [making its own](#) raw materials.

According to Moderna's disclosures in public reports to shareholders, its shipments leveled off last spring at an average of about 68 million doses per month.

Moderna focused primarily on sales to the wealthiest nations that could afford higher prices, said James Krellenstein, a co-founder of the advocacy group PrEP4All that has urged the United States to exercise its rights or leverage the Defense Production Act to produce its own version of Moderna's vaccine.

“This is just plain old market failure,” he said. Activists and some Democrats in Congress have expressed frustration that the Biden administration has not taken a more forceful stance with regard to Moderna’s production.

Moderna said it plans to dramatically boost production in 2022, to between 2 billion and 3 billion doses. It also has pledged to enter into agreements for sales of vaccine to Covax, the international effort to distribute vaccines to low-income countries, as well as a consortium of African countries. And it said last year that it will build a vaccine factory in Africa in the future.

The company did not directly address questions about why its production plateaued in 2021 but did allude to its relatively small size.

“In less than a year after the pandemic’s onset, Moderna’s team of approximately 2,400 employees was able to mobilize the Company’s existing mRNA platform to develop, test, and manufacture an authorized, safe and effective coronavirus vaccine,” the company said in response to written questions.

“People are dying, time is of the essence, and in the midst of it all, Moderna is making billions of dollars — controlling vaccine production and negotiations of a lifesaving vaccine that HHS helped them to create,” Rep. Rosa L. DeLauro (D-Conn.), chairwoman of the House Appropriations Committee, said in a November hearing.

Biden’s Department of Health and Human Services did not respond to requests for comment. The administration is asking drug companies to submit proposals this year to build manufacturing capacity for mRNA vaccines that would be dedicated for government supply and used to meet the administration’s public policy goals.

Biden’s top vaccine science adviser, David Kessler, has said the administration has taken a forceful stance in dealings with Moderna.

Johnson & Johnson has faced problems on two sides, one on safety and the other on manufacturing.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [said last month](#) that Americans should view the mRNA vaccines as preferable because of the extremely rare risk of dangerous blood clots with the Johnson & Johnson shots. The company has said it remains confident in the benefit-risk profile of its vaccine. The company on Dec. 30 announced clinical trial results from South Africa that showed a second shot provided 85 percent protection against hospitalization after omicron had become the dominant variant.

Johnson & Johnson also encountered [crippling manufacturing problems](#) and delayed the projected time it will reach an annual production rate of 1 billion doses to an unspecified time in 2022.

Its government-backed contract manufacturer in the United States, Emergent, endured a months-long crisis in its Baltimore production facility when it [contaminated](#) Johnson & Johnson vaccine with ingredients from AstraZeneca’s vaccine, which was being made in the same facility. Without blanket FDA manufacturing approval for the site, the government has been approving doses batch by batch, with 120 million shots released so far, the vast majority of it Johnson & Johnson vaccine, Emergent said this week.

Johnson & Johnson’s manufacturing [partnership with Merck](#), which was brokered by the Biden administration last spring, was supposed to result in doses late last year but is now expected to begin producing significant volumes of vaccine in the spring, according to administration officials.

Johnson & Johnson’s vaccine has accounted for a tiny percentage of doses administered in the United States: 17.7 million compared with nearly 500 million between Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, according to the [latest data](#) from the CDC.

Novavax, meanwhile, an untested small biotech company with a highly anticipated vaccine, has encountered delays in clinical trials and manufacturing. Eighteen months after the company was backed by

	<p>President Donald Trump’s Operation Warp Speed, it has yet to submit its application to the Food and Drug Administration for emergency use authorization.</p> <p>Last month, it received clearance from the European Union, the World Health Organization, and India, paving the way for a promised production surge in 2022, with most coming from a contract factory in India.</p> <p>“Overall, we expect to achieve an excess of 2 billion doses in 2022,” John Trizzino, Novavax chief commercial and business officer, said in an emailed statement.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 Growing global potato shortage
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/08/potato-shortage-french-fries-japan-kenya-south-africa-pandemic-supply-chains/
GIST	<p>There’s a growing global potato shortage — a real problem for a planet addicted to french fries and chips.</p> <p>A number of popular items, including marmite and cream cheese, have faced scarcities amid supply chain disruptions wrought by the coronavirus pandemic and extreme weather. Potatoes are the latest to join the list, becoming unevenly available in some countries and fast-food chains because of a confluence of factors.</p> <p>In Japan, McDonald’s locations stopped offering large and medium-size french fry orders late last month, after pandemic-related supply chain issues and floods in the Port of Vancouver delayed potato shipments.</p> <p>Days later, South Africa’s leading makers of potato chips warned that potatoes were in disturbingly short supply after a bad frost and excessive rains led to low local yields, on top of global sourcing shortages.</p> <p>In Kenya this month, Kentucky Fried Chicken locations struck french fries, known locally as chips, from menus, as virus-related shipping delays held up containers full of potatoes for more than a month.</p> <p>“You love our chips a little too much, and we’ve run out,” KFC Kenya tweeted on Jan. 3. “Sorry!”</p> <p>In the meantime, the chain offered customers the chance to swap in other menu items — chicken, buns, soda, coleslaw and maize-based ugali — in place of fries in combo meals.</p> <p>Other Kenyan fast-food restaurants were able to offer the goods.</p> <p>“We have enough fries for everyone,” Kenya’s Burger King wrote in a Jan. 4 Instagram post.</p> <p>Beyond the inconvenience, the shortage drew some anger among Kenyans over KFC’s reliance on imported instead of local potatoes, which are in their harvest season.</p> <p>KFC’s chief executive for East Africa, Jacques Theunissen, told Kenya’s Business Daily that it could not easily switch to Kenyan potatoes because of global quality standards.</p> <p>“All suppliers need to go through the global QA [quality assurance] approval process, and we cannot bypass that even if we run out to ensure that our food is safe for consumption by our customers,” he said.</p> <p>Some on social media called for a KFC boycott and asked why the franchise had not sought approval for local suppliers from the start.</p> <p>National Potato Council of Kenya chief executive Wachira Kaguongo told local media that the country’s farmers produce 62 varieties, and “with the proper arrangement, proper planning” they could supply KFC.</p>

	<p>Pandemic or no, potato shortages crop up from time to time because of bad weather, blights or labor disputes.</p> <p>China, Russia, India and the United States are the world's top potato producers. But last year, U.S. farmers had to destroy a glut of millions of potatoes after lockdowns and stay-at-home orders led to a steep decline in demand, including from restaurants. The U.S. potato crop declined by 2 percent in 2021, according to a November report by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.</p> <p>Japan is the United States' largest overseas market for potatoes, according to the USDA. Japan has more than 3,000 McDonald's franchises, and relies on potatoes grown in the United States and sent by ship from North America.</p> <p>McDonald's in Japan said it was considering flying in potatoes to meet demand until the backup in Vancouver was resolved. But after heavy snow in early January further delayed shipments, the company announced that it would be sticking with its small-order maximum for at least another month.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 Flight cancelations no signs of abating
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/transportation/2022/01/08/airline-flight-delays-cancellations/
GIST	<p>Laura Leonard was thrilled to get time off work to visit her mother in Connecticut over the holidays.</p> <p>The trip was supposed to be quick, just four days during New Year's weekend, but after months on the front lines of the pandemic as a case worker at a Chicago-area hospital, she was eager for a break. Then, 90 minutes before her scheduled Jan. 3 departure back home, Southwest Airlines canceled the flight.</p> <p>It cost nearly \$500 to get back to Chicago — two days later and on another airline. During the mad scramble to return home, she considered renting a car and driving 900 miles. The \$680 price tag was just too much.</p> <p>Like thousands of passengers who planned holiday trips, Leonard became caught in an epic travel meltdown in its third week that has forced the cancellation of more than 28,000 flights since the first signs of trouble on Christmas Eve, according to flight-tracking website FlightAware. What began as a pandemic-related challenge quickly snowballed into a multitiered test — coupling the uncertainties of omicron with the more familiar headache of winter weather.</p> <p>"I just wanted my time off. I wanted to enjoy it," Leonard said. "But this is — it's upsetting and I don't know. I've never gone through anything like this and I am just so bummed."</p> <p>The disruption for airlines and travelers is on track to become the most severe since more than 56,000 flights were canceled in a single week at the outset of the pandemic, when people didn't want to fly. A triple whammy of robust demand for holiday travel, staffing shortages triggered by a surge in coronavirus cases and bouts of wintry weather at airline hubs has ushered in one of the worst periods for air travelers in years.</p> <p>More than two weeks later, the surge in daily flight cancellations has shown no signs of abating: Some airlines have announced schedule cuts through the end of the month as they fight to recover.</p> <p>The ferocious speed with which the omicron variant has spread took the nation by surprise, but there's some evidence airlines could have been better prepared. Flight cancellation data shows one carrier, American Airlines, has seen significantly less disruption than others, a record it attributes to changes made during a lengthy ramping-up process that included its own meltdowns last year.</p> <p>While the number of scrubbed flights has been the biggest obstacle for travelers, it's not the only disruption. About one-third of flights nationwide that have taken off in the past two weeks have been late, with the average delay topping 50 minutes on some days, according to FlightAware.</p>

Then there are the hundreds of suitcases and bags still to be claimed at airports — some that didn't follow passengers onto connecting flights; others that were lost when passengers were rerouted through different airports after their original flights were canceled. At Reagan National Airport, an American Airlines hub where more than 85 percent of flights were canceled Monday, baggage claim was filled with unclaimed bags.

American said in a statement that "residual winter storm impacts, icy roads and aircraft deicing conditions inhibited our recovery efforts," adding that it is working to reunite passengers with their luggage.

Olivia Graham considered herself fortunate: her American Airlines flight landed Dec. 22 in Columbus, Ga., with no problem, but her luggage didn't. More than two weeks later, she doesn't know where her suitcase is. It was last spotted in Charlotte.

"They say they're looking but with no progress after two weeks," Graham said. "I just don't know what to do."

American said it is looking into the whereabouts of Graham's bag.

Despite the protracted spell of chaos, industry watchers say a meltdown that left fuming travelers stranded at airports is unlikely to have a lasting effect on airlines' recovery from the pandemic. They say the same dynamics that have pushed demand for travel to near pre-pandemic levels in recent months will continue well into the new year.

"There remains tremendous pent-up demand for air travel, be it leisure, long-haul international or business, which will fill seats, driving our positive industry outlook," Jonathan Root, a senior vice president at Moody's Investors Service, wrote in a report this month.

Helane Becker, an airlines analyst at financial firm Cowen, said while the course of the pandemic is hard to predict and new variants could pose fresh challenges, people are ready to move beyond the pandemic.

"People have had it with covid," she said. "They're sick of hearing about it. They're sick of talking about it."

For many, that will manifest itself in more travel.

Since the start of the pandemic, [about 50,000 airline employees](#) have left the industry through retirements or voluntary buyouts. When passenger demand began ramping up last spring, airlines scrambled to bring back workers. But a tight job market made recruiting more difficult, and gaps remain even as thousands of new employees have been hired.

Becker said the ability of airlines to stabilize service and continue adding capacity will be dictated by their ability to shore up staffing levels.

FlightAware data shows that while recent disruptions have been severe — exacerbated by the unknowns of the omicron variant — bad weather has caused comparable problems for airlines in the past decade.

In February last year, when Texas was in a [deep freeze](#), airlines recorded 16,000 cancellations in one week. The week Hurricane Sandy struck in October 2012 saw almost 20,000 canceled flights. Winter storms in January 2011 prompted 19,000 cancellations.

Even so, it's of little solace to those caught in the chaos.

After visiting family in Maryland for Christmas, Zari Warden, 18, was ready to return to Seattle for the new college semester. But when she woke up Dec. 28, she learned her flight on Alaska Airlines was canceled as the carrier grappled with lingering effects of a snowstorm two days earlier.

“We already figured that the flight was going to be canceled because so many other flights had been canceled,” Warden said. “It wasn’t a surprise — it was just trying to figure out how to go from there.”

Warden’s father called the airline but couldn’t get through to an employee — a common refrain from stranded travelers. After three days, they gave up and bought a ticket for a Jan. 4 flight on United Airlines.

That flight was delayed an hour because baggage crews were shorthanded amid a coronavirus outbreak, but Warden made it home at last.

The first inkling of holiday travel trouble was a Dec. 21 [letter from Delta Air Lines Chief Executive Ed Bastian](#), who asked the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to cut its recommended isolation time after airline employees test positive for the coronavirus. Over the next few days, several airlines announced cancellations because of rising cases among their workforces as the omicron variant began to surge.

Delta, United and JetBlue Airways were among those that canceled flights on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Then came the weather. The day after Christmas, a storm socked Seattle with more snow in a single day than [in all of 2020](#). It crippled the operations of Alaska Airlines, which is headquartered in the city.

In the days that followed, bad weather hit the Upper Midwest as airlines scrambled to staff flights and keep enough workers critical to other functions, such as handling baggage.

FlightAware cancellation data illustrates how in the days that followed, individual airlines suffered at different times over the weeks as storms hit various parts of the country.

Southwest rode out the first several days of industry disruptions with minor effects, only to scrub about 2,000 flights in the first four days of 2022 as snow rolled through its hubs in Chicago, Denver and Baltimore. Southwest has extended a program that offers bonus pay to employees through Jan. 25.

“Our focus is to stabilize the operation as we work through winter storms, while navigating the national covid-19 spike to maintain sufficient staffing, so that we can offer a more reliable schedule as soon as possible,” said Southwest spokesman Brian Parrish.

Alaska Airlines, still struggling in the aftermath of the December storm, first urged customers to defer travel through Jan. 2, then announced it would cut its schedule by 10 percent through January to get back on its feet.

“We’re at our best when we are safe, reliable and caring,” Alaska said in a statement. “And right now, we need to build more reliability back into our operation as we deal with the impacts of omicron and during a time when guests generally fly less.”

One carrier has suffered consistently since late December: SkyWest Airlines has canceled more than 4,000 flights, according to FlightAware. The airline runs shorter routes for major airlines on smaller planes.

Becker said larger carriers tend to cancel their smaller regional flights more quickly because it’s less disruptive. Regional airlines also tend to operate in more challenging areas with less support for remedies like de-icing.

In a statement, SkyWest said it had faced the combined effects of coronavirus cases, quarantined employees and bad weather.

“Given the ongoing surge in COVID cases and related sick calls, we’ve been working with each of our major partners to proactively reduce our January schedules for the remainder of the month to ensure we’re

able to adequately staff our remaining flying as we work to recover in the coming weeks,” the company said.

Becker said the different experiences reflect varying strategies in the industry over the holiday period. American and Southwest faced high-profile meltdowns earlier in 2021 and Becker said they adopted a more conservative approach afterward.

One major carrier has ridden out the past two weeks with minimal disruptions. American Airlines has only canceled about 3 percent of its flights since Christmas — far fewer than its competitors, according to FlightAware.

David Seymour, American’s chief operating officer, attributed the lower numbers to work that began as the carrier sought to rebound from the first year of the pandemic. That effort hit hurdles early on — with American facing waves of cancellations in June and October — but Seymour said the airline recruited staff, brought back those who were on leave and offered incentives to employees who agreed to work extra hours.

Seymour said American built a December schedule it could adequately staff. The airline couldn’t predict the rise of the omicron variant, but had built in a buffer in case of the unexpected, Seymour said. Still, several American customers said that while their flights operated as scheduled, they ran into other difficulties the carrier still has yet to resolve.

Nikki McKenzie, of Los Angeles, said the airline bungled the reservation she and her husband had booked in Ecuador, charged a fee to rebook it, then lost their luggage, forcing them to spend a week with only what they packed in their carry-ons.

“You feel like you’re screaming into a void and no one cares,” she said of attempts to reach customer service employees. Late Friday, after inquiries from The Washington Post, American said it found McKenzie’s suitcase and made arrangements to have it delivered.

Seymour said the airline is expecting a strong summer with rising demand for travel. But as recent weeks have shown, he said, the pandemic could present surprises.

“What the country feels, we’re going to feel,” he said.

Henry Harteveldt, an aviation analyst with [Atmosphere Research Group](#), said airlines are hoping the country moves beyond the worst of omicron by the middle of February.

“Airlines want to be ready to capitalize and be ready for what I suspect will be a very, very strong spring and summer travel season,” he said.

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HEADLINE	01/07 Omicron silver lining boosting immunity?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/01/07/omicron-silver-lining-boost-immunity/
GIST	<p>As omicron sickens millions of Americans, some disease experts are peering into the future, speculating that the massive winter wave of infections from this new coronavirus variant might produce something beneficial in the long run.</p> <p>They note that omicron, while stunningly contagious, appears less likely to send someone to the hospital. The variant’s extraordinary transmissibility could boost immunity as it rips through the population and — once this tide of cases has ebbed — make the pandemic a less dangerous health emergency.</p> <p>The idea that omicron has a silver lining is not a fully formed scientific theory. It’s conjecture, in some cases unspooled on Twitter threads and floated in television interviews. At worst, it is “arm-waving,” to use the term that serious scientists employ as a pejorative.</p>

And even the experts promoting the idea concede that it is an educated guess — and is contingent upon the virus itself, which has repeatedly surprised experts and may [generate new variants](#) that are more dangerous than omicron.

“Every prediction about the future has to come with the parenthesis that there could be another variant that screws this up,” said Robert Wachter, the chief of medicine at the University of California at San Francisco, who has used social media to share his speculation that omicron could carry long-term benefits.

After this omicron wave subsides, he suggests, so many people would have some level of immunity to the virus that it would not subsequently deliver the same level of pain and suffering. In an interview, he said that in the past he would have submitted his thoughts to a peer-reviewed journal, a process that probably would have taken three months. In this health emergency, he went straight to Twitter.

“It’s hard to say omicron is a lucky break, but it sort of is,” Wachter said in the interview. “Because the combination of significantly lower pathogenicity, and only modest immune evasion — and tremendous infectivity — leads to what you would call the opposite of a perfect storm.”

This hypothesis has generated pushback from other scientists, who say too much remains unknown about the virus to make such a forecast. They note that every time the experts have suggested that the pandemic is nearing the endgame, the virus comes up with a new trick — in the case of omicron, packaging [dozens of mutations](#) that make the variant more infectious while also enabling it to slip past a key line of immune defense.

Any broad immunity boost comes at a known, enormously high cost — health-care systems are teetering at the brink and medical workers are burned out. World Health Organization Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned Thursday that omicron infections should not be described as “mild”: “Just like previous variants, omicron is hospitalizing people, and it is killing people.”

The coronavirus continues to mutate, and its spread in much of the world is made easier by the [shortage of vaccines](#) in many developing countries. There is no scientific evidence that the virus is settling into a permanently milder state. A new variant could conceivably combine omicron’s transmissibility with the higher disease severity caused by previous variants, including the still-circulating delta variant.

Emory University biostatistician Natalie Dean said people thought the pandemic was waning last spring, and then delta came along. And then in the fall things looked better — and omicron appeared.

“There’s always this threat of curveballs,” she said.

Infectious-disease experts say the idea that widespread omicron infection will create immunity in a broad swath of the population, and a shield against future variants, is certainly plausible. But it’s unknown how durable that immunity would be or how well it would protect against a future variant.

“The idea that mild infection can lead to better antibody levels and protection in the future from other variants is intriguing, but we certainly don’t have any data on this yet,” said Matthew B. Frieman, a virologist at the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

Monica Gandhi, a physician and colleague of Wachter’s at UC-San Francisco, said in an email that the spread of omicron could signal the approach of the “endgame” of the pandemic, with the virus becoming endemic — meaning it would continue to circulate at modest levels but not cause society-disrupting outbreaks.

“Unless we have a new variant that is more virulent (which can occur if we don’t work hard on global vaccine equity), it looks like we could be approaching endemicity in the U.S. once the omicron surge is over,” she wrote.

Any discussion of long-term benefits from omicron necessarily views the situation at the 30,000-foot level, because the country and much of the world is in the middle of a health crisis. In the United States, patients are flooding hospitals, with most of the country still facing what is likely to be the worst phase of the winter surge.

Wachter acknowledges that omicron has attractive attributes for the long run but extremely bad attributes in the short run: “This is really awful for January. Our [hospitals](#) are being overrun.”

Many people appear to be resigned to being exposed to the virus. That is an understandable response to news reports saying that omicron is a milder version of the coronavirus and that there’s probably no avoiding such a contagious pathogen.

Six medical experts who advised President Biden during the transition from the Trump administration published articles Thursday in the Journal of the American Medical Association that urged the Biden administration to shift its strategy, ending the current cycle of unending emergency and adjusting to the reality of coronavirus infections as a “new normal.” [One article](#) suggested that the administration cease tracking covid deaths independently from those caused by other potentially lethal respiratory viruses, including flu.

“The ‘new normal’ requires recognizing that SARS-CoV-2 is but one of several circulating respiratory viruses that include influenza, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), and more. COVID-19 must now be considered among the risks posed by all respiratory viral illnesses combined,” wrote Ezekiel Emanuel, Celine Gounder and Michael Osterholm, prominent disease experts who have been outspoken throughout the pandemic.

The administration’s pandemic guidance has shifted slightly: It still emphasizes vaccinations and [booster shots](#), and common-sense measures including mask-wearing and avoidance of indoor crowds, but people also should live their lives and not isolate themselves. And scientists as well as government officials are generally emphatic that [schools remain open](#) for in-person learning.

“My attitude has been that I’m respectful of the virus — I’m taking reasonable precautions — but I’m not going to the end of the earth to avoid it,” said Andrew Noymer, an epidemiologist at the University of California at Irvine. “We’re all going to get this thing eventually.”

Vaccines usually [prevent severe outcomes](#) from omicron, particularly after a booster dose. And a number of [treatments remain effective](#) against omicron, though they are in [short supply](#) as demand surges. So far, there has not been a sharp increase in the number of deaths, and this is now many weeks into the omicron wave.

It remains unclear why omicron infections are typically less severe than those caused by delta. Some of it is probably attributable to widespread immunity from vaccination and previous infections. But the variant itself appears to operate differently. [Laboratory experiments](#) suggest that although omicron can multiply [faster than delta](#) and is able to sidestep key parts of immunity, its ability to invade lung cells and cause lethal pneumonia has been hobbled.

There is no guarantee that the next variant will do the same. And omicron still packs a punch.

“It’s not like omicron is running through the population and nobody is getting hospitalized,” said Michael Diamond, a virologist at Washington University in St. Louis. “People are getting sick and still dying.” He is not ready to embrace omicron as a blessing in disguise.

“Yes, we will generate more immunity in the population, so maybe we will be poised better against a future variant — maybe. It remains to be seen,” Diamond said.

In a massive team effort, Diamond and collaborators scattered across the United States and Japan infected mice and hamsters with omicron and discovered a consistent, striking pattern: The omicron variant clearly causes less severe disease in rodents.

The results, [published in a not-yet-peer-reviewed study](#), show that omicron is biologically different from the variants that came before. But there are limitations to such experiments. Mice are different from humans, and their milder disease was measured in weight loss. Mice infected with previous versions of the virus lost weight, but mice infected with omicron did not.

In hamsters, which develop respiratory illness analogous to what humans experience when infected, omicron is less likely to proliferate and cause damage in the lungs — instead tending to cause milder, upper-airway infections.

“Something is different about the ability to replicate in animals, and it seems to be slower and not able to infect the lung at the same level as the other variants,” Diamond said, calling that finding unexpected. But he said he is cautious about extrapolating too far from the animal data. Just because omicron is mild in rodents doesn’t mean it would be mild in people, too.

Why is omicron less adept at infecting the cells deep in the lungs? Converging lines of evidence from [multiple laboratories](#) show that omicron uses a different method from previous variants to enter cells. At the University of Cambridge, scientists built miniature models of human lungs in a dish and found that harmless replicas of the omicron virus were less able to infect cells than delta was. They traced that trait back to its inefficient ability to enter cells by interacting with a protein called TMPRSS2, which is abundant in the cells of the lung. Omicron also shows less aptitude for fusing cells together, which creates masses that are a hallmark of severe covid-19 in autopsies.

Other scientists have used different experiments to arrive at [similar conclusions](#). That could explain why this version of the virus appears less likely to cause lethal pneumonia and might more closely resemble an upper respiratory infection, like a cold.

This quirk of omicron may just be a bit of luck — not a sign that all future variants will follow omicron’s path.

“I’m worried about people getting the wrong idea about this, because what we have observed is something that has happened in omicron. I don’t think this is the way all viruses are going to go necessarily from now on,” said Ravindra Gupta, a virologist at the University of Cambridge.

Barney Graham, a scientist recently retired from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases whose work [laid the foundation for many coronavirus vaccines](#), said it is increasingly difficult to tell whether changes in disease severity can be traced to the virus itself or the presence of prior immunity.

And Graham said he is worried that a virus that is milder in adults may not also be milder in children.

“Younger children have smaller airways, so they can experience the same thing as adults in a different way. So if the virus is still infecting the airways, readily infecting the airways, then the very young children with small airways may have more trouble clearing that,” Graham said.

Graham said he is optimistic overall. His hope is that as the virus evolves, it will be boxed into a corner. The mutations that give the virus an edge against human immunity could come with an Achilles’ heel, hindering its ability to spread.

Over multiple waves of disease, the coronavirus could cease to be a pandemic contagion and instead be more of a seasonal threat. But how many waves would that take? He doesn’t know. The challenge is to minimize the threat of future surges by increasing vaccinations globally.

	“Within the next three to six years, I think everyone on Earth is going to be exposed and to some level infected with the virus,” Graham said. “It’s inevitable.”
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HEADLINE	01/08 Pandemic stalks 2021 job market records
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/01/08/2021-shattered-records-but/
GIST	<p>While the labor market began 2021 in a deep hole, huge numbers of Americans found work amid the pandemic, with a record-breaking 6.4 million jobs added over the course of last year, eclipsing all expectations.</p> <p>Rank-and-file workers’ hourly paychecks rose by \$1.46 an hour, another record-breaking number. Gains were especially pronounced for those in lower-paying industries.</p> <p>It was, by these measures and many others, the best year in labor-market history, ignited in part by aggressive stimulus spending that pushed consumer spending to stratospheric levels. But the numbers on their own can be downright misleading.</p> <p>The 6.4 million jobs gained this year, while a record in absolute terms, represents only a 4.5 percent increase in the workforce. That’s smaller than the 5.0 percent growth seen in 1978, when a much smaller labor force added 4.3 million jobs. In fact, relative to the size of the workforce, it’s only the 11th best calendar year since record-keeping began in 1939.</p> <p>This year’s numbers are also distorted because the recovery isn’t complete. As a rule, the labor market has a much easier time regaining lost jobs than it does creating new ones. The economy lost 22.4 million jobs at the height of coronavirus lockdowns. When you account for the 12.3 million jobs regained in 2020 as businesses reopened, plus the 6.4 million added in 2021, the economy is still missing 3.6 million jobs (the numbers may not match perfectly due to rounding). And that would just bring it back to pre-recession levels.</p> <p>To catch up with population growth, the economy needs 5 million more jobs, according to economist Elise Gould of the Economic Policy Institute, a left-leaning think tank. Before the recession, jobs were growing faster than population. To reach levels where employment would have been, had pre-pandemic job growth trends continued, the U.S. would have to add 8 million jobs, Gould says. And that will only get harder as federal stimulus programs run out.</p> <p>The easiest gains that propelled eye-popping months like million-job-July are now off the table. Last December, there were still 3.1 million workers on temporary layoff who could be called back to their employers. This December, that pool of temporarily laid off workers had fallen to 812,000. That’s below its 2019 average and dropping at a steady clip. Employers who still need workers will have to cast a wider net and look at workers with less-relevant experience or try to woo workers with flexibility, like opportunities for remote work or more control of their schedules.</p> <p>As a result, Americans are experiencing a surge in job security. There are more job openings per jobseeker than there have been at any other time since the government started keeping track in 2000, said University of Minnesota economist Aaron Sojourner, who worked in the White House during the Obama and Trump administrations. The number of part-time workers who want full-time work continues to fall rapidly, as employers are asking staff to work longer hours.</p> <p>One common thread between worker leverage and the slowing job growth in recent months? The number of available workers remains low. More than 1.5 million Americans have retired earlier than expected during the pandemic, and hundreds of thousands more have left the labor force for other reasons, including child care and health worries.</p>

The share of Americans working or looking for work plunged during the pandemic and [remains near levels not seen since the 1970s](#), when many women were still working at home and had yet to join the official labor force.

Employers who can't find workers may look to automation to fill the gap. Ohio pipemaker Advanced Drainage Systems saw record sales in the most recent quarter but couldn't keep its production lines running full time due to labor shortages, said CEO Donald Scott Barbour on a recent earnings call. Barbour mentioned the company was pursuing "all kinds of other projects of automation" at a manufacturing facility in Kentucky, so they could meet demand without big increases in hiring.

Even the most careful headline numbers hide that not all groups of Americans have recovered equally. Asian workers have already regained all the jobs they lost during the downturn, and their Hispanic peers are close, but White and Black workers remain farther behind. Black women, in particular, still have 4.5 percent fewer workers than they did before the pandemic began. White women have 2.3 percent fewer.

"The pandemic exacerbated existing labor market inequities," [wrote Nela Richardson, ADP's chief economist, in a recent blog post](#). "Low-skilled workers took the brunt of job losses. The recovery has been slowest for people of color and women. Women also are disproportionately shouldering added family responsibility and suffering bigger pay gaps."

Like the jobs numbers, the wage gains of 2021 also tend to wilt under scrutiny. A record \$1.46-an-hour raise brought pay for the average rank-and-file worker to \$26.61.

That 5.8 percent increase is still the biggest annual raise workers have seen in 40 years, since the last big (7.2 percent) bump in 1981. Relative to the size of their paychecks, workers saw a bigger raise every year from 1971 to 1981 than they did in 2021.

As in the 1970s, workers' raises look even worse this year after accounting for inflation. Prices grew 6.8 percent in the year ending in November, the most recent data out. To put it another way, workers' earnings have actually lost ground as supply-chain issues, the pandemic and swollen savings accounts drive up the cost of living at a pace not seen in decades.

The highest wage gains tended to go to workers in the lowest-paid industries, according to a Washington Post analysis of Labor Department data. For workers in those industries, like nonmanagerial gas station workers who saw pay jump 14.1 percent to \$14.72 an hour, wage gains have stayed ahead of rising prices.

The fastest gains of any subsector went to nonmanagerial hotel workers, who saw pay climb 22.5 percent to \$18.90 an hour, as employers were forced to pay more for some jobs that leave workers exposed to the still-virulent coronavirus.

The global pandemic, of course, stalked the 2021 labor market from start to finish. The numbers in December's report were measured in the middle of the month, before the Omicron variant ignited a record-breaking acceleration in covid-19 cases. If the latest affected the labor market [like the Delta variant did](#) — an impact that's far from guaranteed — it likely won't show up until next month's numbers.

So, as we etch 2021 into the record books, remember that we do so with a big, spiky coronavirus-shaped asterisk. It was a year in which everything moved fast, but nothing was ever as simple as it seemed.

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HEADLINE	01/08 Global daily average known new cases: 2M
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/08/world/omicrons-spread-drives-the-global-daily-average-of-known-new-cases-past-a-staggering-2-million.html
GIST	The pace of daily new infections of the coronavirus has nearly doubled in the past week, surpassing two million known cases a day, underscoring just how quickly the Omicron variant has spread around the world.

	<p>On April 25 last year, the global average hit a high of more than 827,000 cases, a level that has been surpassed on each of the last 12 days as the world's case curve charts a nearly vertical rise.</p> <p>Health authorities around the world reported 2.1 million cases on average in the past seven days, nearly three times the amount two weeks ago, according to a New York Times database. The latest wave of cases has been driven by outbreaks in the United States and Europe, where the Omicron variant has become dominant. The count is likely lower than the actual number of infections, given that many people discover they are infected with home tests. Not all of those cases are reported to authorities.</p> <p>While deaths and hospitalizations have not increased as quickly, the surge has overwhelmed health care facilities from the United to Europe, and led companies, schools and governments to curb services because of a shortage of workers. The latest spike has also led to new curfews, lockdowns and restrictions around the world and discussions of whether booster shots should become mandatory.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 Europe protests against pandemic policies
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/08/world/scattered-protests-against-pandemic-policies-pop-up-in-europe.html
GIST	<p>Demonstrations against pandemic restrictions were waged across Europe on Saturday.</p> <p>In cities across France, anti-vaccine protesters rallied a day after President Emmanuel Macron expressed no regrets for the harsh language he directed at millions of the nation's unvaccinated citizens.</p> <p>In Paris, protesters retorted by adopting his slangy wording, chanting, "We'll piss you off."</p> <p>In Germany, there were large demonstrations in Düsseldorf, Frankfurt and Magdeburg, while rallies took place in many other cities where people opposed measures put in place to combat the spread of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>There were also protests in Romania after stricter pandemic measures went into force there, and in Italy.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 Chicago mayor rejects teachers' proposal
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/08/world/chicago-shools-teachers-union-lightfoot.html
GIST	<p>A labor standoff between Chicago educators and Mayor Lori Lightfoot showed no signs of abating over the weekend, as the mayor swiftly rejected a proposal by the teachers' union to ramp up coronavirus testing and return to in-person instruction on Jan. 18.</p> <p>"The best, safest place for kids to be is in school," Ms. Lightfoot and Pedro Martinez, the Chicago Public Schools chief executive, said in a joint statement on Saturday. "Students need to be back in person as soon as possible. That's what parents want. That's what the science supports. We will not relent."</p> <p>Ms. Lightfoot's and Mr. Martinez's sharp retort, which also accused labor leaders of "not listening," came minutes after the Chicago Teachers Union announced a proposal for a return to classrooms that it framed as a compromise. In it, the union dropped demands for all students to produce negative tests before coming back to class, and said teachers were willing to return to school buildings starting on Monday, though not for in-person instruction.</p> <p>"This represents a change in our position," Jesse Sharkey, the union president, said at a news conference on Saturday. "We're appealing to the public — and to the mayor to find in her heart to make the compromise to reopen the schools."</p>

Hundreds of thousands of students in the nation's third-largest school district missed three days of class last week after members of the Chicago Teachers Union [voted to stop reporting to work](#) amid concerns over the rapidly spreading Omicron variant.

School district officials, who have insisted that classrooms are safe, declined to move to online instruction, as the union suggested. Ms. Lightfoot has repeatedly accused the union of inconveniencing working families and harming the academic and social progress of children.

Most American school districts have forged ahead with in-person instruction, as the Biden administration has urged, even as the Omicron variant has shattered local and national case records. Some large school districts, including in Cleveland and Milwaukee, have moved classes online. But the dispute in Chicago, where there has been no instruction of any sort since class was dismissed on Tuesday, has been notable for its acrimony and for the day-to-day uncertainty for parents, teachers and students.

Under the plan the union outlined on Saturday, Chicago teachers would have distributed equipment and materials for online instruction and helped parents sign up for virus testing on Monday and Tuesday, then taught students remotely for the rest of next week.

The union had already said that members planned to return to schools on Jan. 18, after Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a date that did not change under the new proposal. The union also continued to push to have all children enrolled in Covid-19 testing unless their parents opted them out, a move that Ms. Lightfoot has opposed. Currently, students are tested through the schools only if parents proactively give permission.

"The mayor can't be, like, a hard no and morally opposed to widespread testing," Mr. Sharkey said, "and also be a hard no and be morally opposed to any short-term period of remote."

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HEADLINE	01/08 Trial looms after China activists gathering
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/08/world/asia/china-rights-defense-activists.html
GIST	<p>Twenty or so lawyers and activists quietly arrived at a gaudy "Nice Home Party" rental villa near the Chinese seaside. They ate takeout food, sang along to a karaoke machine and played table soccer. But they also had a serious purpose: discussing China's besieged human rights movement.</p> <p>Two years after that weekend gathering in December 2019, the two best-known attendees — Xu Zhiyong and Ding Jiaxi — are awaiting trial on subversion charges related to the gathering, according to indictments. Police and prosecutors have seized on the weekend meeting to deliver a hammer blow to China's beleaguered "rights defense" movement of lawyers and activists seeking democratic change.</p> <p>Get-togethers like this, once common among Chinese rights campaigners, have become increasingly risky under Xi Jinping's hard-line rule. Under him, many journals, research organizations and groups that once sustained independent-minded activists in China have been dissolved.</p> <p>As he prepares to extend his era in power, those who still speak out are wondering how China's human rights movement can survive a tightening ring of monitoring, house arrest, detentions and trials.</p> <p>"This shows how they're terrified of even small buds of Chinese citizen consciousness and civic society," Liu Sifang, a teacher and amateur musician who took part in the gathering, said in an interview from Los Angeles, where he now lives. He fled abroad in late 2019 after the police began detaining those who attended the villa get-together. Border police in China have blocked his wife from joining him, he said.</p> <p>"They don't want to allow these sprouts to survive," Mr. Liu said, "so our little gathering has been treated as a big political incident."</p>

At a restaurant lunch on the second day of their two-day meet-up, some noticed people who seemed to be watching them and taking pictures. Even if they had been monitored, Mr. Liu said, most thought it would perhaps lead to brief detention and tough questioning from the police officers assigned to monitor them.

They were wrong.

Several people who attended the weekend session in Xiamen, in eastern China, were soon detained, spending weeks or months locked up before release. One attendee, the lawyer Chang Weiping, was detained for a second time and arrested on the charge of subversion after [stating on video](#) that interrogators had tortured him during his first stint of detention.

Mr. Xu, 48, and Mr. Ding, 54, both have told lawyers that they did nothing illegal, but they face prison terms of [10 years or even longer](#) if a party-controlled court convicts them, as seems almost inevitable.

Some experts and supporters had expected they would stand trial in late 2021. That time passed without a trial announcement, however. They still are waiting for news of a hearing, possibly in the buildup to Winter Olympics, which start next month in Beijing.

While Western governments have focused on mass detentions of Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region, the prosecution of Mr. Xu and Mr. Ding highlights the Chinese Communist Party's intense campaign against dissent all across China. Security officials [have vowed](#) to root out any political opposition ahead of a party congress later in 2022, when Mr. Xi is poised to gain another five-year term as top leader.

"He and Xu Zhiyong were so confident," said Mr. Ding's wife, Sophie Luo, who lives in the United States and has [campaigned for their release](#). "That's their faith and also their weakness, I would say. They think that history is headed toward democracy and freedom."

By the time that Mr. Xi came to power in late 2012, Mr. Xu had already spent a decade as one of China's best-known advocates for human rights.

Mr. Xu sometimes noted with a smile that his home county in rural central China is called Minquan, which means "people's rights." In 2003, he and two other Peking University law school classmates [shot to prominence](#) through a successful campaign to abolish a widely despised detention system used against migrant workers in Chinese cities.

In the following decade, he and other activist lawyers sought to awaken citizen initiative and expand rights by taking up cases that exposed the failings of China's legal system: farmers whose land had been confiscated, prisoners who claimed torture and concocted testimony by the police, and aggrieved citizens detained in informal jails for trying to take their complaints to officials in Beijing.

"We must find a way to grow political forces that exist outside the system," he wrote in "[A Beautiful China](#)," a manifesto of his beliefs. The way forward, he said, was to find ways for independent social groups to "grow in the gaps of the autocratic system."

By 2012, Mr. Ding, an engineer turned successful commercial lawyer, had joined the cause.

He and Mr. Xu turned to promoting a "New Citizens' Movement," which encouraged Chinese people to exercise the rights given lip service in China's Constitution: to association, free speech and a say in government. Mr. Xu was the theorist of the cause, while Mr. Ding tended to focus on meeting supporters.

Mr. Ding and Mr. Xu seemed hopeful at first that Mr. Xi's government would be no harsher than his predecessor. But they were [detained in 2013](#) after promoting an open letter urging China's most powerful officials to disclose their wealth. They were [convicted in 2014](#), when Mr. Xu received a prison sentence of four years and Mr. Ding received [three and a half](#).

In the years that followed, growing numbers of rights activists and outspoken lawyers were detained, and some were sentenced to prison. Still, after their release in 2017, Mr. Xu and Mr. Ding quietly renewed contacts with sympathizers. Even as Mr. Xi tightened political controls, Mr. Xu and Mr. Ding appeared carried along by hopes that party rule was more brittle than many outsiders believed.

“They just wanted to keep alive the movement,” Teng Biao, a Chinese human rights lawyer and a longtime friend of Mr. Xu’s, said in a telephone interview.

“They knew the risk was higher than before,” said Mr. Teng, a [visiting professor](#) at the University of Chicago. “But they didn’t expect that it would lead to a huge crackdown.”

In 2018 Mr. Xu, Mr. Ding and like-minded friends and acquaintances met in Shandong Province, in eastern China, to relax and discuss their cause.

When they gathered a year later in the Xiamen villa, nobody there noticed anything alarming, said Mr. Liu, the songwriter who attended.

Participants had thought they had temporarily shaken off the police officers assigned to watch them. But they were still found out.

Eighteen days later, the detentions began.

Those rounded up included Mr. Ding, [who later told his lawyer](#) that investigators forced him to stay awake by constantly showing him an adulatory documentary about China’s leader, Mr. Xi, at an earsplitting volume for 10 days and nights.

Mr. Xu slipped into hiding, sheltered for a time by a [former prosecutor](#) in southern China.

By then, the Covid outbreak was spreading across China, stirring anger that the government had not acted sooner to stifle infections. From hiding, Mr. Xu issued a letter [urging Mr. Xi to step down](#), arguing that he was trying to “defy the tide of history.”

He was [arrested in mid-February](#) of 2020. His girlfriend, Li Qiaochu, who spoke out about Mr. Xu’s treatment and her own secretive detention, was re-detained and formally arrested last year.

Mr. Xi now appears confident that China has largely contained Covid, while the United States, Britain and other Western countries have suffered waves of infections and deaths that have diminished their standing in the eyes of many Chinese people. His power seems entrenched, and the party has officially [eulogized him](#) as a one of its great leaders.

But Mr. Xu remains unbowed while he awaits trial in Shandong Province, said Liang Xiaojun, who was one of Mr. Xu’s lawyers until the Chinese authorities recently disbarred him, citing his comments on politics and human rights issues.

“He has the demeanor of a revolutionary — that he cannot consider anything except building a beautiful China,” Mr. Liang said of his last meeting with Mr. Xu in late November. Still, Mr. Liang added: “If they had thought that the consequences would be this serious, I don’t think they would have held that meeting.”

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HEADLINE	01/08 New worries arise for Winter Olympics
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/08/world/figure-skating-olympic-team.html
GIST	U.S. Figure Skating on Saturday announced the women’s team heading to Beijing for the Winter Olympics next month. It will include a top-ranked competitor who withdrew from the national championships this week in Nashville after a positive coronavirus test , a stark reminder of a resurgent pandemic still capable of disrupting sports events and lifelong dreams.

“Things happen unfortunately, but it is what it is,” [Alysa Liu wrote on social media after her withdrawal on Friday](#). A strong showing this past season on the international circuit, in spite of having to miss nationals, helped solidify her a spot to compete at the Games. Skaters are selected for the Olympic team based on their body of work over the course of a year — the U.S. national championships in figure skating are not an Olympic trial event, as they are in some other sports.

Also named to the women’s singles team were [Mariah Bell, the 25-year-old whose victory](#) on Friday made her the oldest female national singles champion in 95 years, and Karen Chen, 22, a 2018 Olympian who finished second to Bell.

Liu, 16, is among [at least six skaters who tested positive](#) this week and withdrew from nationals as the highly contagious Omicron variant drives a new wave of infections around the world — just weeks before the Beijing Games are scheduled to begin. Many of the skaters described having adopted stringent measures, including [forgoing private lessons at the rink](#), to avoid just such outcomes.

Amber Glenn, another skater, tested positive and withdrew [“with a heavy heart”](#) from nationals, losing what was her last opportunity to impress the Olympic selection committee. On [Instagram](#), she described how she had taken precautions like social distancing and wearing K95 face masks. She said she initially attributed early symptoms to nerves or allergies.

Brandon Frazier, who, with Alexa Knierim, is the reigning national pairs champion, tested positive on Wednesday and withdrew from competition. U.S. Figure Skating will announce the United States’ two Olympic pairs teams on Sunday, and Frazier and Knierim said they had petitioned to be selected for the Games.

It remains unclear, though, how long it will take potential Olympians battling the virus to feel well enough to skate again or to begin testing negative, only adding to the uncertainty as many athletes prepare to travel to Beijing soon.

China has already announced [elaborate measures](#) to protect against the coronavirus reaching its own population or participants in the Winter Games, and to ensure those two groups have almost no contact with one another. Last month, [Chinese officials detailed some of the strictest rules](#) yet for its own citizens attending the Games.

Spectators — which were already limited to residents of China — will be allowed to clap, but not shout, in support of athletes. Waiters, cleaners and other support staff will not be allowed to leave Olympic venues to visit their families. And any Olympic participants leaving the vicinity for other parts of China will be required to spend at least one week in quarantine, followed by at least two weeks of isolation at home.

Foreign athletes, trainers, coaches, referees, journalists and a few others will be restricted to a [“closed loop”](#) of hotels and sports venues, linked by special buses and trains. Everyone will face daily P.C.R. tests. And still, Chinese officials acknowledged they were bracing for the inevitability that some infections will emerge at the Olympics.

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HEADLINE	01/07 Climate change, Covid transforming skiing
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/07/climate/skiing-climate-change.html
GIST	<p>STEVENS PASS, Wash. — Skiing is an endangered sport, caught between a warming planet and a global pandemic. But there’s a boom in one corner of the ski world that’s being driven, at least in part, by a combination of climate change and Covid.</p> <p>The unexpected upturn shows how skiers are adapting to the dual crises and how one winter sport is evolving as snow cover declines around the world.</p>

Ski touring, or uphill skiing, a hybrid style that combines elements of cross country and downhill, has been popular in Europe for decades. In the United States, though, it's traditionally been a sport for mountaineers and extreme athletes, who use the special skis to trek uphill and into the backcountry in search of untouched powder.

That changed when the pandemic shut down ski resorts in 2020. Sales of touring gear in the United States spiked as recreational skiers searched for ways to get uphill without lifts. Over a million people in the United States used touring equipment last year, even as most ski lifts reopened, with sales of the specialized gear rising 260 percent between November 2019 and the same month a year later, according to the market research firm NPD Group.

"It's not linear growth," said Drew Hardesty, a skier and forecaster at the Utah Avalanche Center. "It's exponential."

Tour skiers use removable traction strips called skins on their skis and adjustable bindings with free heels that allow them to walk. To descend, they remove the skins and lock in the heels for downhill runs.

The sport was born in Europe as a practical means of winter transportation, with the predecessors of today's tour skis appearing [as early as the 16th century](#). Uphill skiing is "part of the fabric of the culture" in Europe, according to Drew Saunders, a senior manager at Oberalp Group, the mountain sports company that owns the Dynafit and Pomoca ski brands. "The European market is almost a generation ahead of us in terms of the maturity and sophistication and ski touring in general," Mr. Saunders said.

Ski touring began to trickle into the American mainstream in the mid-2000s, when [videos of wild backcountry descents](#) in places like the Himalayas, the high Andes and the Arctic began to circulate on the internet. "Back then, there was barely anyone doing it," said Ingrid Backstrom, a professional skier who has helped to popularize backcountry skiing in the United States through films of her runs on remote slopes. "The equipment was harder to find, more expensive and didn't work as well."

In recent years, with snow cover diminishing and untouched powder increasingly difficult to reach, skiers like Ms. Backstrom have been pushed onto groomed trails more often. That increased visibility, combined with the pandemic shutdowns, she said, has prompted more skiers to try touring gear. "That always helps to have a visible example," she said.

Ms. Backstrom also said more skiers are opting to avoid the backcountry and ski uphill on managed slopes because it's "more safe given extreme changes in climate and weather."

One of the main reasons is that, as weather [becomes more volatile](#), avalanches are becoming more difficult to predict. For instance, much of the work done by Mr. Hardesty, the forecaster, is based on his previous observations and scientists' computer modeling of past avalanches. But, he said, "the old hard drive isn't necessarily going to be accurate at looking at the avalanches that we're going to be seeing."

He also said avalanche threats were amplified by wildfires, which are being [worsened by extreme heat and dryness](#) linked to climate change. "Increased layers of ash and dust within the snowpack create weak layers" that can cleave into avalanches, Mr. Hardesty said, and can accentuate the melting of the snowpack in general.

For Ms. Backstrom, whose brother was killed in a skiing accident, the safety considerations are increasingly pressing. "Now that we have two little kids, I'm very choosy about my backcountry days because of the risk of it and the risk of avalanches," she said.

She now sometimes chooses to stay on resort runs, even when the snow conditions would enable her to traverse the backcountry. "It's a straightforward way to hike up and exercise, have that freedom and feel the fun of skiing back down," she said.

Beyond making backcountry skiing less safe, climate change is also making it harder to traverse unmanaged terrain for a growing portion of the season as snow cover diminishes.

Many North American ski resorts have spent much of this season [relying almost entirely](#) on artificial snow. “Normally there would be enough snow to at least go attempt to tour in the backcountry by now,” said Tristan Droppert, head of United States marketing for Black Crows, a ski manufacturer, in late December. “And this year, it’s still almost impossible.”

In Colorado, where ski touring is especially popular among endurance athletes, skiers have been confined to a sharply limited range of terrain. Copper Mountain, the training ground for the United States Ski Team, was only 50 percent open in the days leading up to Christmas. The resort has quadrupled the number of uphill ski routes for ski touring, but the majority of the trails are being supplemented by artificial snow machines. And at nearby Bluebird Backcountry, a ski area founded last year and dedicated exclusively to uphill skiing, [there wasn’t enough snow](#) to open by Christmas.

Between 1982 and 2016, the American ski season shrunk by an average of 34 days annually, and levels of snow cover saw an average drop of 41 percent, according to [a study in the journal Geophysical Research Letters](#).

“We are going to see the continuous shortening of the snow season,” said Xubin Zeng, director of the Climate Dynamics and Hydrometeorology Center at the University of Arizona and lead author of the study. “My best estimate is it will be at least double what we’ve already lost” by 2050. This trend will continue to affect not only skiing, but [farming, fishing](#) and wild ecosystems that [rely on regular snow cover](#).

With that in mind, the industry is grappling with whether to adapt to the changing conditions or try to overcome them with new infrastructure and artificial snow.

China and the International Olympic Committee are preparing for the 2022 Winter Games on sites that will very likely use 100 percent artificial snow. About 49 million gallons of water will be needed to create the conditions necessary for the events, according to [a 2019 estimate](#), a decision some have criticized as unsustainable.

A growing number of uphill skiers say they use touring skis on natural snow as a reflection of their values. “Powder is one of the natural wonders of the world,” Ms. Backstrom said. “It’s just a pure miracle of nature, and you can’t replicate that in any way, shape or form.”

Hanging on to those values may require further adjustments as snow cover continues to thin.

“We’re probably going to have to walk for a while in the dirt and our shoes,” Mr. Droppert said of ski touring in coming years, “and then strap on skis and skins.”

“But we’re always going to ski, even if it means we have to walk in the mud.”

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HEADLINE	01/07 Russia military positions threaten Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/01/07/world/europe/ukraine-maps.html
GIST	<p>A build-up of Russian forces near the border with Ukraine has raised concerns among Western and Ukrainian officials that the Kremlin might be preparing for significant military action, possibly an invasion. This map, compiled by The New York Times, shows troops, tanks and heavy artillery moving into positions that threaten to widen the conflict in Ukraine’s east as well as potentially open a new front on Ukraine’s northern border, closer to the capital, Kyiv.</p> <p>Russia currently has about 100,000 troops on the Ukraine border, according to Ukrainian and Western officials. U.S. intelligence agencies have assessed that the Kremlin has drawn up plans for a military</p>

operation involving up to 175,000 troops that could begin in the coming weeks. While it is not clear whether President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia has decided to launch an attack, analysts say the country is well on its way toward constructing the architecture needed for a significant military intervention in Ukraine.

On Monday, representatives from the United States and Russia will meet in Geneva for talks aimed at de-escalating the crisis. Mr. Putin has said that Russia wants what he calls security guarantees, which would, among other things, bar the United States and NATO from expanding eastward into regions the Kremlin deems as within its sphere of influence.

This map represents a snapshot of current Russian positions, as well as broad estimates of the number of troops and kinds of equipment deployed within striking distance of Ukraine. It is based on information obtained by Ukrainian and Western officials as well as independent military analysts and satellite imagery.

Much of the build-up so far, according to officials and military analysts, has involved troops and equipment that take time to deploy, including tanks and heavy armor, some of which have traveled by train from bases as far away as Siberia.

Before launching a significant military operation, however, Russia will likely need to deploy reserve soldiers and logistical infrastructure, like field hospitals, that currently appear to be missing from positions near Ukraine, analysts say. These elements along with additional troops could be deployed rapidly should a decision be made to attack.

Much of the attention so far has been directed at the build-up of forces near two breakaway provinces in eastern Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk, where since 2014 the Ukrainian military has been at war with Russian-backed separatists. The separatist forces, which include Russian troops and Ukrainian fighters opposed to Kyiv's rule, amount to about 30,000, according to an assessment by the Ukrainian military.

Since the start of 2021, Russia has moved an additional five battalion tactical groups into the border area near Luhansk and Donetsk, including about 5,000 soldiers sent to reinforce the 12,000 or so stationed there permanently, according to Ukrainian authorities. Just as significant, according to officials and military analysts, are the forces massing north of Ukraine in areas such as Klintsy, at the point where the Ukrainian, Russian and Belarusian borders meet. These positions are within easy striking distance of the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv.

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Click on source link to view referenced map

HEADLINE	01/08 US details costs of Russia invasion Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/08/us/politics/us-sanctions-russia-ukraine.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The Biden administration and its allies are assembling a punishing set of financial, technology and military sanctions against Russia that they say would go into effect within hours of an invasion of Ukraine, hoping to make clear to President Vladimir V. Putin the high cost he would pay if he sends troops across the border.</p> <p>In interviews, officials described details of those plans for the first time, just ahead of a series of diplomatic negotiations to defuse the crisis with Moscow, one of the most perilous moments in Europe since the end of the Cold War. The talks begin on Monday in Geneva and then move across Europe.</p> <p>The plans the United States has discussed with allies in recent days include cutting off Russia's largest financial institutions from global transactions, imposing an embargo on American-made or American-designed technology needed for defense-related and consumer industries, and arming insurgents in Ukraine who would conduct what would amount to a guerrilla war against a Russian military occupation, if it comes to that.</p>

Such moves are rarely telegraphed in advance. But with the negotiations looming — and the fate of Europe’s post-Cold War borders and NATO’s military presence on the continent at stake — President Biden’s advisers say they are trying to signal to Mr. Putin exactly what he would face, at home and abroad, in hopes of influencing his decisions in coming weeks.

The talks on Monday will be led by the deputy secretary of state, Wendy R. Sherman, an experienced diplomat who negotiated the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran. Russian officials are expected to press their demands for “security guarantees,” including prohibiting the deployment of any missiles in Europe that could strike Russia and the placement of weaponry or troops in former Soviet states that joined NATO after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Mr. Putin is also demanding an end to NATO expansion, including a promise that Ukraine could never join the nuclear alliance. While the Biden administration has said it is willing to discuss all Russian security concerns — and has a long list of its own — the demands amount to a dismantling of the security architecture of Europe built after the Soviet Union’s collapse.

On Wednesday, members of the NATO alliance will meet with Russia in Brussels. The next day in Vienna, Ukrainian officials will also be at the table, for the first time, for talks at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. But with 57 members, that group is so large that few expect serious negotiations.

American diplomats worry that after the whirlwind week, the Russians could declare that their security concerns are not being met — and use the failure of talks as a justification for military action. “No one should be surprised if Russia instigates a provocation or incident,” Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said on Friday, and “then tries to use it to justify military intervention, hoping that by the time the world realizes the ruse, it’ll be too late.”

This time, he said, “we’ve been clear with Russia about what it will face if it continues on this path, including economic measures that we haven’t used before — massive consequences.”

That warning, however, is an unspoken acknowledgment that the Obama administration’s response in 2014, when Mr. Putin last invaded parts of Ukraine, was too tentative and mild. At that time, Mr. Putin surprised the world by annexing Crimea and fueling a grinding proxy war in eastern Ukraine. Now, American officials say they are trying to learn from their past mistakes.

An internal review of those actions, conducted by the White House in recent weeks, concluded that while Obama-era sanctions damaged Russia’s economy and led to a sell-off of its currency, they failed at their central strategic objective: to cause so much pain that Mr. Putin would be forced to withdraw. Nearly eight years later, Russia still holds Crimea and has ignored most of the diplomatic commitments it made in the negotiations that followed, known as [the Minsk accords](#).

Those sanctions started with actions against some smaller Russian banks and individuals directly involved in the invasion. Virtually all of the sanctions — and additional measures imposed after [Russia’s interference in the 2016 election](#) and after [the SolarWinds cyberattack](#) in 2020 that sabotaged computer programs used by the federal government and American companies — remain in place. But there is scant evidence that they have deterred Mr. Putin, who began building up forces near the Ukrainian border just as Mr. Biden announced his response to SolarWinds last spring.

When asked recently whether he could point to any evidence that the Russians were deterred by recent sanctions, a senior aide to Mr. Biden paused a moment and then said, “No, none.”

Rather than start with moves against small banks and on-the-ground military commanders, officials said, the new sanctions would be directed at cutting off the largest Russian financial institutions that depend on global financial transfers. The plan was described by one official as a “high-impact, quick-action response that we did not pursue in 2014.”

The officials declined to say whether the United States was prepared to cut Russia off from the SWIFT system, which executes global financial transactions between more than 1,100 banks in 200 countries. But European officials say they have discussed that possibility — something most major European powers had declined to consider until recently, for fear that Russia might retaliate by attempting to cut off gas and oil flows in the winter, even briefly.

The SWIFT cutoff has been used [against Iran](#) with some success. But Cynthia Roberts, a professor of political science at Hunter College, noted that Russia had learned a lot about “global sanctions-proofing,” and she expressed doubt that the country would suffer as much as American officials contend if it were disconnected from SWIFT.

“They would definitely take a big hit,” she said at a seminar held this past week by the Center for the National Interest. But she noted that Russia had stockpiled hundreds of billions in gold and dollar reserves and that the Bank of China had joined Russia’s own domestic version of SWIFT. That raises the possibility that Russia and China, as part of their expanding partnership, might join forces to help Moscow evade the West’s action.

The bottom line, she said, is that “sanctions have a very poor coercive track record.”

The technology sanctions would target some of Mr. Putin’s favored industries — particularly aerospace and arms, which are major producers of revenue for the Russian government. The focus would be on Russian-built fighter aircraft, anti-aircraft systems, anti-satellite systems, space systems and emerging technologies where Russia is hoping to make gains, like artificial intelligence and quantum computing.

Similar export controls have been surprisingly effective against China’s leading producer of cellphones, [Huawei](#), which for a while was among the top providers of smartphones to the world. That part of its business has all but collapsed in the past year because it cannot obtain advanced chips. But the Russian economy bears little resemblance to China’s, and it is not clear that it is equally vulnerable to an embargo of semiconductors and other microelectronics that are critical to Chinese manufacturing.

There are other options under consideration that go well beyond merely banning the sale of computer chips. In one additional step, according to American officials, the Commerce Department could issue a ruling that would essentially ban the export of any consumer goods to Russia — from cellphones and laptop computers to refrigerators and washing machines — that contain American-made or American-designed electronics. That would apply not only to American makers, but also to European, South Korean and other foreign manufacturers that use American chips or software.

Unlike China, Russia does not make many of these products — and the effects on consumers could be broad.

But a senior European official said there was still a debate about whether the Russian people would blame Mr. Putin, or the United States and its allies, for their inability to buy the goods.

While the Commerce and Treasury Departments work on sanctions that would maximize America’s advantages over Russia, the Pentagon is developing plans that have echoes of the proxy wars of the 1960s and ’70s.

To underscore the potential pain for Russia, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark A. Milley, spoke with his Russian counterpart two weeks ago and delivered a stark message: Yes, he said, you could invade Ukraine and probably roll over the Ukrainian military, which stands little chance of repelling a far larger, better armed Russian force.

But the swift victory would be followed, General Milley told Gen. Valery Gerasimov, by a bloody insurgency, similar to the one that led to the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan more than three decades ago, according to officials familiar with the discussion.

General Milley did not detail to General Gerasimov the planning underway in Washington to support an insurgency, a so-called “porcupine strategy” to make invading Ukraine hard for the Russians to swallow. That includes the advance positioning of arms for Ukrainian insurgents, probably including Stinger antiaircraft missiles, that could be used against Russian forces.

More than a month ago, Mr. Biden’s national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, created a new interagency planning cell to examine a range of contingencies if Mr. Putin goes ahead with an invasion. The cell, which reports directly to Mr. Sullivan, includes representatives from the National Security Council, the intelligence agencies and the Departments of Defense, State, Treasury, Energy and Homeland Security.

The cell is attempting to tailor responses to the many types of attacks that could unfold in the next few weeks, from cyberattacks aimed at crippling Ukraine’s electric grid and pipelines to the seizure of small or large amounts of territory.

Intelligence officials said recently that they thought the least likely possibility was a full-scale invasion in which the Russians try to take the capital, Kyiv. Many of the assessments, however, have explored more incremental moves by Mr. Putin, which could include seizing a bit more land in the Donbas region, where war has ground into a stalemate, or a land bridge to Crimea.

Several officials familiar with the planning say the administration is looking at European nations that could provide more aid to support Ukrainian forces before any conflict, as well as in the initial stages of a Russian invasion.

Lt. Col. Anton Semelroth, a Defense Department spokesman, noted in December that the United States had already committed over \$2.5 billion in security assistance to Ukraine since 2014, including \$450 million in 2021 alone. Over the past three months, it has delivered 180 Javelin missiles, two patrol boats, ammunition for grenade launchers, machine guns, secure radios, medical equipment and other items that U.S. officials describe as defensive in nature.

But the planning cell is considering more lethal weaponry, such as antiaircraft weapons.

After visiting Ukraine last month, Representative Seth Moulton, Democrat of Massachusetts and a former Marine officer, said that in his view, “We need to make any incursion by Russia more painful — Day 1 painful, not six months from now painful.”

“We have a short window to take decisive action to deter Putin from a serious invasion,” Mr. Moulton said in an interview. “I worry our current deterrent tactics are responding to an invasion rather than preventing it.”

One option likely to be discussed at NATO this coming week is a plan to increase, possibly by several thousand, the number of troops stationed in the Baltics and in Southeast Europe.

On Friday, Mr. Blinken again warned that if the Russians invade, NATO would deploy more forces along the borders between NATO nations and Russian-controlled territory.

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HEADLINE	01/08 US, UK leaders: same place on virus policy
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/08/world/europe/coronavirus-omicron-biden-boris-johnson.html
GIST	<p>LONDON — On the evening of Dec. 21, Prime Minister Boris Johnson appeared from 10 Downing Street to tell anxious Britons they could “go ahead with their Christmas plans,” despite a surge in new coronavirus cases. At nearly the same moment, President Biden took to a White House podium to give Americans a similar greenlight.</p> <p>It was a striking, if unintended, display of synchronicity from two leaders who began with very different approaches to the pandemic, to say nothing of politics. Their convergence in how to handle the Omicron</p>

variant says a lot about how countries are confronting the virus, more than two years after it first threatened the world.

For Mr. Johnson and Mr. Biden, analysts said, the politics and science of Covid have nudged them toward a policy of trying to live with the virus rather than putting their countries back on war footing. It is a highly risky strategy: Hospitals across Britain and parts of the United States are already close to overrun with patients. But for now, it is better than the alternative: Shutting down their economies again.

“A Conservative prime minister trying to deal in a responsible way with Covid is very different than a Democratic president trying to deal responsibly with Covid,” said Geoff Garin, a Democratic pollster in Washington. And yet, he said, their options are no longer all that different.

“From both a medical perspective and a political perspective,” Mr. Garin said, “there’s not as strong an imperative for people to hunker down in the way they were hunkering down a year ago.”

Some analysts say the two leaders had little choice. Both are dealing with lockdown-weary populations. Both have made headway in vaccinating their citizens, though Britain remains ahead of the United States. And both have seen their popularity erode as their early promises to vanquish the virus wilted.

Several of Mr. Biden’s former scientific advisers [this week publicly urged him to overhaul his strategy](#) to shift the focus from banishing the virus to a “new normal” of coexisting with it. That echoes Mr. Johnson’s words when he lifted restrictions last July. “We must ask ourselves,” he said, “‘When will we be able to return to normal?’”

Devi Sridhar, an American scientist who heads the global health program at the University of Edinburgh, said, “The scientific community has broad consensus now that we have to use the tools we have to stay open and avoid the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. But it’s not easy at all, as we are seeing.”

The alignment of Mr. Johnson and Mr. Biden is significant because Britain has often served as a Covid test case for the United States — a few weeks ahead in seeing the effects of a new wave and a model, for good or ill, in how to respond to it.

It was the first country to approve a vaccine and the fastest major economy to roll it out. Its frightening projections, from Imperial College London, about how many people could die in an uncontrolled pandemic helped push a reluctant Mr. Johnson and an equally reluctant President Donald J. Trump to call for social distancing restrictions in their countries.

That Mr. Johnson and Mr. Trump initially resisted such measures was hardly a surprise, given their ideological kinship as populist politicians. When Mr. Johnson locked down Britain, several days after his European neighbors, he promised to “send the virus packing” in 12 weeks. Mr. Trump likewise vowed that Covid, “like a miracle,” would soon disappear. Both later suffered through bouts with the disease.

Mr. Biden, taking office, promised a different approach, one that paid greater heed to scientific advice and embraced difficult measures like “expanded masking, testing and social distancing.” Though Mr. Johnson never flouted scientific advice like Mr. Trump, he was sunnier than Mr. Biden, continuing to promise that the crisis would soon pass.

But both he and Mr. Biden have languished politically as new variants have made Covid far more stubborn than they had hoped. Last July 4, with new cases dropping and vaccination rates rising, Mr. Biden claimed the United States had gained “the upper hand” on the virus. Weeks later, the Delta variant was sweeping through the country.

In England, with nearly 70 percent of adults having had two doses of a vaccine, Mr. Johnson lifted virtually all social-distancing rules on July 19, a bold — some said reckless — move that the London tabloids nicknamed “Freedom Day.” After a midsummer lull in cases that appeared to vindicate Mr. Johnson’s gamble, the Omicron variant has now driven new cases in Britain to more than 150,000 a day.

Mr. Biden and Mr. Johnson have different powers in dealing with the pandemic. As prime minister, Mr. Johnson can order lockdowns in England, a step he has taken twice since his first lockdown in March 2020. In the United States, those restrictions are in the hands of governors, a few of whom, like the Florida Republican Ron DeSantis, have become vocal critics of Mr. Biden's approach.

For Mr. Johnson, the major obstacle is not defiant regional leaders or the opposition but members of his own Conservative Party, who fiercely oppose further lockdowns and have rebelled against even modest moves in that direction.

The prime minister has kept open the possibility of further restrictions. But analysts say that given his eroding popularity, he no longer has the political capital to persuade his party to go along with an economically damaging lockdown, even if scientists recommended it.

Mr. Johnson is "essentially now a prisoner of his more hawkish cabinet colleagues and the 100 or so MPs who seem to be allergic to any kind of public health restrictions," said Tim Bale, a professor of politics at Queen Mary, University of London. They "just feel that the state has grown too big in trying to combat Covid and that they really don't want the government to grow any bigger," Mr. Bale said.

Some British analysts draw a comparison between red-state governors like Mr. DeSantis and Conservative lawmakers from the "red wall," former Labour strongholds in the Midlands and the north of England that Mr. Johnson's Tories swept in the 2019 election with his promise to "Get Brexit done."

These are not low-tax, small-government conservatives in the tradition of Ronald Reagan or Margaret Thatcher, but right-leaning populists who model themselves on Mr. Trump and the Mr. Johnson who championed the Brexit vote — voters the prime minister would need to win re-election.

Some critics argue that Mr. Biden and Mr. Johnson are both out of step with their countries. Britons have proven far more tolerant of lockdowns than the lawmakers in the prime minister's party. In parts of the United States, by contrast, popular resistance to lockdowns is widespread and deeply entrenched.

"Biden suffers from seeming to do too much and Boris suffers from seeming to do too little," said Frank Luntz, a Republican strategist who was a classmate of Mr. Johnson's at Oxford University. "Biden would have done a better job if he had led Britain, and Boris would have done a better job if he led the U.S."

Mr. Biden, unlike Mr. Johnson, does not face an internal party rebellion on his Covid policy. But the continued grip of the pandemic has sapped the president's poll ratings, stoking fears of a Republican landslide in the midterm elections. The calls for change from members of Mr. Biden's former scientific brain-trust, some said, reflected concerns that his Covid messaging was lagging reality.

Others pointed out that the president's determination to keep schools and businesses open, despite the soaring number of cases, signaled that a change in thinking was underway in the White House — if a few months later than that in Downing Street.

"When Biden says we ought to be concerned but not panicked, he's meeting Americans where they are," Mr. Garin, the Democratic pollster, said. "He's also meeting the science where it is."

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HEADLINE	01/08 Pakistan heavy snow kills 21 in tourist town
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/08/world/asia/pakistan-snow-kills-21-murree-hill-station.html
GIST	ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — At least 21 people died on Saturday when their cars became stuck on snow-covered roads leading to a popular tourist town just outside Islamabad, Pakistan's capital. Soldiers rescued people from at least 24,000 vehicles stranded by heavy snow near the hill station town of Murree, officials said. Other snowbound drivers and their passengers were given blankets and food.

“Where machinery can’t reach, troops have been moved and they are clearing traffic and opening roads,” read a statement by the Pakistani military.

Rescue officials said the victims were found dead in their vehicles, some possibly dying of carbon monoxide poisoning overnight. The dead included a family of four daughters and two sons, all under 15 years of age.

The heavy snowfall in Murree and Pakistan’s northern regions was predicted by the country’s meteorological department [no later than Jan. 5](#), and came as part of a broader wave of cold weather affecting the region, including the Indian side of the Himalayas.

Officials blamed the disaster on large numbers of tourists who failed to consider weather forecasts. But critics of the government said the local authorities were ill-equipped to handle the annual influx and underprepared to deal with emergency situations.

Murree, a rustic mountainside town 21 miles northeast of Islamabad, is a popular tourist destination that attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors every year, and Prime Minister Imran Khan has personally promoted tourism to the area. A few days ago, Fawad Chaudhry, the Pakistani information minister, praised the heavy inflow of tourists, saying 100,000 vehicles had entered Murree.

But on Saturday, Mr. Chaudhry [was issuing pleas](#) for people to cancel their travel plans as it had become impossible for local officials to cater to such large numbers of people. And as disaster hit, the prime minister appeared to be blaming the tourists for negligence.

“Unprecedented snowfall & rush of ppl proceeding without checking weather conditions caught district admin unprepared,” Mr. Khan [said on Twitter](#).

Critics say despite Murree’s proximity to the country’s capital, and despite the predictable nature of the heavy tourist flow every year, the local authorities are often overwhelmed by the large number of visitors.

“For a tragedy like this to happen on the roads of the country’s most frequented hill station is appalling,” said Sarah N. Ahmad, an urban policy specialist who founded Urban Innovation, a research and advocacy group based in Lahore.

“These deaths were entirely avoidable and the government is answerable to the people for this oversight.”

Heavy snowfall on the Indian side blocked roads and disrupted transport in the Kashmir region as well as in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh.

Flights were repeatedly canceled in Srinagar, the capital city of Indian-administered Kashmir, where [tourists are flocking to the snow and skiing](#).

There were also reports of snow blocking roads between Srinagar and Ladakh, a border region at the center of recent military tensions between India and China. Tens of thousands of Indian and Chinese troops remain in high altitudes and freezing temperatures [for a second winter](#) after skirmishes between the two countries’ militaries in the summer of 2020.

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HEADLINE	01/07 Omicron changing experts thinking on data
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/01/07/us/covid-data-explained.html
GIST	Coronavirus case counts have reached record highs in the United States and continue to climb. Hospitalizations have surpassed the height of the Delta wave. Deaths are just beginning to rise.

The overall pattern is familiar, but a fresh perspective on how to interpret these metrics is necessary as a faster but less severe variant tears through the country. Here's how to think about the data in the coming days and weeks.

Case spikes show Omicron still has room to grow

In just a matter of days, coronavirus [case counts](#) have shattered previous records in the United States, as the Omicron variant spreads rapidly just about everywhere, including in communities with high vaccination rates. All but 13 states have seen record cases in the past week.

While these case counts are staggering, experts say they are not as alarming as they might have been a few months or a year ago. Instead, they should serve as a warning for the country, to adjust behaviors and policies to reduce infections and protect the most vulnerable.

"The circumstances have changed and we must adapt," said Dr. Shama Cash-Goldwasser, a senior technical adviser at Resolve to Save Lives, a global health organization. "We have a less severe variant, plus many are vaccinated, but evidence suggests the vaccines are not as good at preventing infection with Omicron as they were against Delta."

As high as the case counts are in many places, they are most certainly undercounted right now, as many Omicron infections are asymptomatic or mild and people may not know to test. Testing shortages are also limiting access, and experts say that a majority of results from popular at-home tests are not reported to public health departments.

The sharp rise in cases in many states could be followed by sharp falls, as observed in [South Africa](#), but experts caution that the sheer volume of cases could still lead to significant numbers of extremely sick people, even from a variant that overall gives people less severe disease.

"We are going to have a lot of people sick, and even if a smaller proportion of those individuals have really horrible illnesses and adverse outcomes, it's still a lot of people," said Janet Hamilton, the executive director of the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists.

With so much risk for infection right now, public health experts say that keeping an eye on case counts and trends can encourage people to make decisions to protect themselves from infection and to avoid infecting those around them, like by getting a booster shot or wearing a mask indoors.

"We're still in a situation that needs caution," said Ms. Hamilton. "We've had a month with Omicron and there's just still a lot we don't know."

Hospitalizations reveal a system under strain

Because the Omicron variant appears to cause less severe illness, hospitalization figures may tell us less about the disease and more about the strain on the health care system, which has consequences for everyone.

Hospitalizations have not yet seen the same explosive growth as cases, but this metric tends to lag case counts, and it may be too early to gauge Omicron's full impact. What is clear is that the number of people hospitalized with Covid nationwide has already surpassed the peak of the Delta-led wave and is still rising steeply.

Hospitals, emergency rooms, urgent care centers and doctors' offices are [overburdened and understaffed](#) across the country. Hospitals in some areas are already shutting down [elective surgeries](#) and must even treat critical care patients in emergency rooms.

And in parts of the country like the Midwest, hospitals may be in a more precarious situation — they were already under strain, having yet to recover from the Delta surge before Omicron-led illnesses began to rise.

Hospitalization figures are not without flaws. “National data don’t allow us to distinguish between people hospitalized because of Covid-19 and those who happened to test positive while admitted for something else,” said Jason L. Salemi, an epidemiologist at the University of South Florida, who tracks [Covid data](#).

These “incidental patients” may be more prevalent right now because Omicron is so transmissible. Some hospitals are reporting that these patients may make up as much as [half of their hospitalizations](#).

Dr. Salemi noted that a coronavirus infection can still exacerbate the primary illness of incidental patients; pose a risk of infection to staffers and other patients; and contribute to the overall strain on medical centers.

National hospitalization data notably does not include up-to-date measures of severe illness, such as the number of people on ventilators or their length of stay. (Federal data [tracks some of this](#), but it is about two months behind.)

“The absence of these details about hospitalizations in the available data just muddy the water as we try to understand Omicron’s impact,” Dr. Salemi said.

Public health experts suggest monitoring Covid patients in intensive care as well as [intensive care unit capacity](#) to better gauge Covid’s impact on serious illness. About one in four U.S. hospitals with I.C.U.s recently reported that at least 95 percent of their critical care beds were full.

Death trends are not yet clear

There is hope that vaccination coverage, improved medical treatment and the milder characteristics of the Omicron variant will mean that fewer infections end in death. But the unprecedented number of cases may still lead to high levels of mortality.

“Are we going to see deaths increase? Yes, we are,” said Ms. Hamilton of the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists. “And they are going to go up if cases keep increasing this way.”

Experience throughout the pandemic shows it takes at least three weeks after an increase in cases to see a resulting increase in deaths, which may explain why death counts have risen only slightly so far.

Trends in deaths lag behind cases and hospitalizations by weeks because of the time it takes for people to become seriously ill and the time needed to complete and file death records. This lag varies by state and often becomes longer in times when there are more deaths, or when a case surge is overwhelming the public health system, as it is now.

Already, there are some troubling early signs of death counts rising in some of the Northeast states first hit with Omicron, including [New York](#), [Connecticut](#), [New Jersey](#) and [Massachusetts](#).

Deaths can generally be predicted by looking at hospitalizations and counting backward by three weeks, suggesting that deaths will almost double in the next three weeks, said Dr. David Dowdy, an epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. But it's still possible that deaths will not rise as sharply as cases and hospitalizations have, he added.

“This linkage between hospitalizations and deaths is being broken as well now, as more people are getting hospitalized for milder illness,” Dr. Dowdy said. “So I actually anticipate that deaths will not reach quite that level.”

“In any case, though, in the midst of major surges,” he said, “we can't wait three weeks for data in order to act appropriately now.”

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HEADLINE	01/08 Covid disrupts cruise line industry
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/08/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#royal-caribbean-cruises-covid

GIST	<p>Royal Caribbean International announced on Friday that it was suspending some of its upcoming cruises because of concerns over the fast-spreading Omicron variant.</p> <p>The company, one of the world’s biggest cruise operators, said that it was taking the step “out of an abundance of caution.” This is the second time this week that Royal Caribbean has called off voyages.</p> <p>“We regret having to cancel our guests’ long-awaited vacations and appreciate their loyalty and understanding,” the company said in a statement on its website. “Our top priority is always the well-being of our guests, our crew and the communities we visit.”</p> <p>Royal Caribbean said it had called off planned trips on three ships — Serenade of the Seas, Symphony of the Seas and Jewel of the Seas — and pushed back the return to cruising of another, Vision of the Seas, to March.</p> <p>The cruising industry was shuttered by the pandemic for nearly 18 months. It made a comeback this past summer but has faced mounting criticism about its safety protocols in recent weeks.</p> <p>In December, clusters broke out aboard two Royal Caribbean cruises after they left port in Florida, and more than a dozen people tested positive on a Norwegian Cruise Line vessel after it returned to New Orleans. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention later urged Americans to avoid taking cruises, regardless of vaccination status, and raised its Covid-19 warning level for cruise ships to 4, the highest level.</p> <p>Last weekend, a New Year’s cruise operated by a German line, AIDA Cruises, was held up in Portugal when dozens of crew members tested positive. Passengers started testing positive a few days later.</p> <p>Royal Caribbean, which restarted its U.S. operations in June, requires travelers 12 and older to be fully vaccinated against Covid-19 and to test negative before boarding. Younger children who are not vaccinated must provide a negative P.C.R. test result before sailing and test negative at the terminal before boarding. The company has said all of its crew members are fully vaccinated and that they undergo weekly testing.</p> <p>The company is not alone in canceling cruises this week. Norwegian Cruise Line also suspended voyages in response to the growing number of coronavirus cases onboard some of its ships.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 France president stands by harsh criticism
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/08/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#macron-stands-by-his-harsh-words-to-the-unvaccinated-as-cases-continue-to-soar
GIST	<p>President Emmanuel Macron of France expressed no regrets on Friday for saying that he wanted to “piss off” millions of France’s unvaccinated citizens earlier this week by barring them from entering public spaces, comments that drew criticism from his political opponents even as new reported cases in the country continued to soar.</p> <p>“You can be upset by the familiar turn of phrase, which I fully stand by,” Mr. Macron said at a news conference in Paris alongside Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, who was there for an official visit. But, Mr. Macron said, “what upsets me is the situation that we are in.”</p> <p>“I think that it was my responsibility to sound the alarm a bit,” he added.</p> <p>France reported over 260,000 new coronavirus cases on Thursday, and the seven-day rolling average for that figure has surpassed 200,000 for the first time. Over the past week, hospital admissions have increased by around 40 percent, and Covid deaths by roughly 10 percent, according to government figures.</p>

Alain Fischer, who is in charge of coordinating France's Covid strategy, [told the LCI news channel](#) on Friday that the current wave of cases could reach its peak in approximately 10 days.

In [a discussion with readers of the daily newspaper Le Parisien](#) published this week, Mr. Macron had used crude slang to answer a woman who was complaining that unvaccinated patients occupied many beds in intensive care units, preventing those who were admitted for other serious illnesses from getting care.

"I really want to piss off the unvaccinated," Mr. Macron had said in his reply, using [a vulgar word](#) that means to bother or annoy in French. "And so we are going to continue doing that, until the end."

Political opponents pounced on Mr. Macron for crudely singling out a segment of the French population. But the comments appeared to be a calculated move to tap into the anger of the majority of people who are vaccinated and have grown frustrated with those who are still resisting booster shots.

Nearly 80 percent of the French population is vaccinated, while roughly five million people — from among more than 65 million — have not received a single shot.

Several [recent polls](#) have found that while a majority of respondents disapproved of the tone used by Mr. Macron, most agreed with the substance of his comments and with his government's strategy to ensure that its restrictions interfere with the daily lives of its unvaccinated population.

"When some people turn their freedom, which becomes an irresponsibility, into a slogan, not only do they endanger the lives of others, they also restrict the freedom of others," Mr. Macron said at the news conference on Friday. "And that I cannot accept."

On Thursday, the French Parliament's Lower House approved a government-sponsored bill that requires people to prove their vaccination status in order to access restaurants, cinemas, museums, long-distance trains and other public spaces. A negative Covid test would no longer be enough for a "health pass."

The bill, which would also introduce heavy fines and prison sentences for people using fake health passes, will be reviewed by the French Senate next week and is expected to pass in mid-January.

Mr. Macron is not the only European leader who has raised blunt criticisms of the unvaccinated this week.

In Britain, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said during a visit to a vaccination center in Northampton on Thursday that it was a "tragedy," given the continuing pressures faced by health workers, that people in the country were "spouting complete nonsense about vaccination."

"It's absolutely wrong, it's totally counterproductive, and the stuff they're putting out on social media is complete mumbo jumbo," Mr. Johnson said, [according to the BBC](#). "I think it's time that I, the government, call them out on what they're doing," he said.

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HEADLINE	01/08 Oregon deploys National Guard to hospitals
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/08/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#oregon-omicron-national-guard
GIST	<p>Oregon will deploy up to 500 National Guard members in the coming weeks to support health care workers as Covid hospitalizations rise in the state, Gov. Kate Brown said on Friday.</p> <p>Ms. Brown said that beginning next week, a first deployment of 125 personnel would go to work at hospitals, providing logistical support such as moving equipment and assisting with testing.</p> <p>"With more than 500 current hospitalizations and daily record-breaking numbers of Covid-19 cases, we are at another critical point in this pandemic," Ms. Brown said in a statement. Her office said the state would work with hospital systems to monitor the need for additional National Guard deployments.</p>

	<p>Like other parts of the country, Oregon has recorded a rapid increase in infections since the arrival of the Omicron variant, with daily case counts now nearly double the previous peak over the summer. Covid hospitalizations are well below the summer peak but have started to rise again, up 40 percent since Christmas.</p> <p>Researchers at Oregon Health & Science University have projected that the hospitalization trend will continue and set new highs for the state by the end of the month. They encouraged people to avoid indoor gatherings, wear masks and get vaccinated or boosted as soon as possible.</p> <p>“Anything Oregonians can do now to reduce the spread of the virus will help to preserve hospital capacity for those who need it most,” said Dr. Peter Graven, the director of the university’s Office of Advanced Analytics.</p> <p>Governors of other states have also activated National Guard troops in recent days to help support health workers who are battling the Omicron surge.</p> <p>Gov. Gavin Newsom of California said on Friday that more than 200 National Guard members would be deployed across 50 sites to help meet demand for testing. He said they would assist with crowd control and provide clinical care in places with staffing shortages.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 Testing issues multiply: long waits, costs
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/08/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#for-many-getting-tested-means-long-waits-or-digging-deeper-into-the-wallet
GIST	<p>Many Americans have been waiting in long lines at free testing sites since before the Christmas and New Year’s holiday rush. Plenty of others are avoiding the lines and paying \$20 or more for over-the-counter, at-home tests — if they can find one.</p> <p>Out of options, some have headed to crowded emergency rooms</p> <p>“The current demand for testing far exceeds the testing resources that are available,” said Michael T. Osterholm, an epidemiologist and director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota.</p> <p>That was evident this week as many people searched for tests to take before returning to school or work. President Biden addressed the problem last month by announcing that 500 million tests would be available for free starting in January. But his administration has not given a launch date for the program, and that number of tests will not go far in a country with a population of some 330 million.</p> <p>Jenna Zitomer, 25, said that her family of five in Westchester, N.Y., has spent around \$680 on rapid tests in recent months. “It’s pretty crazy, especially since that’s well over half a paycheck for me,” said Ms. Zitomer, a research specialist. “It feels like something we need to start budgeting for every month now, like groceries or utilities. For my family, not having access to testing could mean exposing multiple severely immunocompromised people to Covid-19. That basically makes it life or death.”</p> <p>Ms. Zitomer added that at her local testing center, “lines have gotten so long that they started canceling appointments and full days of testing because the drive-through lines cause traffic problems.”</p> <p>Britt Crow-Miller, 35, a senior lecturer at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, said that her family has spent around \$500 on at-home test kits. With two adults and three children, a single round costs around \$100. “Who can afford that every time someone has the sniffles?” she said. “As a person fortunate enough to be well-employed and have a partner who is also well-employed, I am very conscious of the fact that at-home testing is essentially a luxury.”</p>

And yet, Ms. Crow-Miller, said that if one of the children “wakes up with a scratchy throat, I don’t feel like a responsible community member sending them to school without first giving them a test.”

Elizabeth Sasser, 24, a network planning analyst living in Syracuse, N.Y., said her expenses for tests — about \$300 — was well spent. “My family also did have asymptomatic positives,” she said, “which would have likely led to more infections if it had not been for the prior purchase of at-home tests.”

There have been gaps in testing capacity since the start of the pandemic.

In early 2020, researchers scrambled to find the swabs and liquids needed to collect and store samples being sent to laboratories for polymerase chain reaction, or P.C.R., tests, considered the gold standard for viral detection. U.S. testing backlogs continued into that summer, in part because there [was a shortage](#) of tiny pieces of tapered plastic, called pipette tips, that are used to quickly and precisely move liquid between vials.

The equipment shortage is no longer the weak link in the supply chain, but new problems have arisen. One is simply that demand is outstripping supply.

There is also preliminary evidence that the at-home antigen tests many Americans rely on — at least as currently administered, with a nasal swab — may fail to detect some Omicron cases in the first days of infection. Researchers say Omicron replicates faster or earlier in the throat and mouth than in the nose.

That could complicate the strategy for beating back the current wave, in which the latest data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that Omicron accounts for [95 percent](#) of new cases.

The at-home tests, which can deliver results in minutes, remain an important public health tool, scientists say. Positive results are especially informative because it can take days to get results from P.C.R. the tests. But a negative at-home test should be treated with caution.

“Everyone wants these tests to do more than they can,” Dr. Osterholm said.

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HEADLINE	01/07 WA emergency weather proclamation
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/flooding-western-washington-heavy-rain-snowmelt/281-04e969bc-c203-4ab5-9ed7-fa14b456e17f
GIST	<p>GRAYS HARBOR COUNTY, Wash. — Washington Gov. Jay Inslee issued an emergency proclamation over extensive rain and snow causing flooding in several counties and extended mountain pass closures.</p> <p>Several areas across the Puget Sound region continue to experience flooding due to recent heavy rain and snowmelt.</p> <p>There are evacuations in place in multiple counties.</p> <p>As of Friday evening, at least nine rivers and creeks across western Washington were under Flood Warnings. The National Weather Service (NWS) issued a Flood Watch for King County through Saturday afternoon.</p> <p>You can find information on road closures, evacuations and Flood Warnings below:</p> <p>Lewis County</p> <p>The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) reopened a 20-mile stretch of I-5 between Grand Mound (milepost 88) and U.S. 12 south of Chehalis (milepost 68) around 12:45 p.m. after closing for several hours due to rising floodwaters from the Chehalis River near 13th Street.</p>

Previously, Washington State Patrol Trooper Will Finn told KING 5 the 20-mile stretch of I-5 would be closed until at least Monday.

So far, officials have carried out 21 water rescues in Lewis County.

The Skookumchuck River at Centralia is projected to rise near the current record crest previously set in 1996. The river is forecast to crest at 190.8 feet on Friday night. The river is flooding roads, residential areas and farmlands in the Skookumchuck River valley.

Lewis County Commissioners asked residents to take necessary steps to protect themselves and their families, especially if they see water near their home or current location.

Mason County

Residents in flood-prone areas of Skokomish Valley in Mason County were ordered to either evacuate Thursday or prepare to shelter in place for three days due to quickly rising floodwaters with imminent flooding and road closures expected.

"We expect more road closures with some areas cut-off and inaccessible as early as 3:00 p.m. [Thursday]," [Mason County Emergency Management](#) wrote.

The North Mason Regional Fire Authority (NMRFA) [posted on Facebook](#) Friday morning that anyone in need of sandbags can go to [NMRFA Station 21 in Belfair](#) or [Station 81 in Tahuya](#) to pick some up.

The flooding comes after Mason County [declared a state of emergency](#) Wednesday ahead of the heavy rain due to the "extensive damage" dealt by the recent snowstorm.

Grays Harbor County

A Flood Warning went into effect Thursday afternoon for areas of Grays Harbor County after major flooding was forecasted for the Chehalis River above Grand Mound. The NWS said Friday the Flood Warning is expected to be in place through Sunday night.

The NWS said the Chehalis River above Grand Mound is expected to crest at 145.2 feet Saturday morning and fall below flood stage Sunday afternoon. Major flooding is expected, "inundating roads and farmlands in Independence Valley." Floodwaters are expected to cover State Route 12 and James, Independence and Moon roads.

The Chehalis River at Porter is expected to crest at 51.3 feet early Sunday and fall below flood stage Tuesday morning, the NWS said.

The [Hoquiam Police Department](#) (HPD) told residents to prepare for localized flooding. The city's public works department opened a free sandbag station next to the Department of Licensing Office at the end of 8th Street.

Thurston County

Thurston County Emergency Management issued a Level 2 evacuation for the Chehalis River Thursday. Residents living near the river should prepare for localized flooding and be prepared to evacuate the area if advised to by law enforcement.

The NWS said the Chehalis River above Grand Mound reached the flood stage Thursday and will continue rising Friday. The river is expected to crest at 145.4 feet Saturday morning and fall below the flood stage Sunday afternoon.

The Skookumchuck River near Bucoda will crest near the record flood stage at 216 feet Friday morning before beginning to recede Friday afternoon and evening. The NWS said the river will fall below flood stage late Saturday afternoon or evening.

King County

In Issaquah, the Issaquah Creek flooded Front Street N to NW Holly Street to Dogwood Street Friday morning.

Friends of the Issaquah Salmon Hatchery said Friday that the portion of the creek near the hatchery held, so none of the salmon or eggs were damaged.

Two years ago in February, the creek rose to levels that [impacted the hatchery and the garage of one of the staff's homes](#).

Active flood warnings:

Flood Warnings have also been issued for various parts of western Washington as snowmelt and heavy rain create potentially disastrous conditions.

The National Weather Service (NWS) issued a [Flood Warning](#) for the following rivers:

- Puyallup River near Orting
- Chehalis River near Grand Mound, Doty, Centralia and Porter
- Deschutes River near Rainier
- Newaukum River near Chehalis
- Satsop River near Satsop
- Skokomish River near Potlach
- Skookumchuck River near Centralia and Bucoda
- South Prairie Creek at South Prairie
- Stillaguamish River near Arlington

Rain is expected to impact the region until Sunday when a little morning fog is expected to give way to sunny skies.

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HEADLINE	01/07 Reinfections 5% cases; majority unvaxxed
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/coronavirus/reinfections-make-up-less-than-5-of-covid-cases-in-wa-however-majority-are-unvaccinated
GIST	<p>Over the last four months, the Washington State Department of Health has been collecting data on people who have once again tested positive for COVID-19 after already catching the virus.</p> <p>“We’re using the data that we’re observing to help the public make good choices,” said Dr. Scott Lindquist with the Department of Health.</p> <p>But, according to Lindquist, “The percent of reinfections are a small part of total infections.”</p> <p>While that might be relatively good news, it's concerning for the unvaccinated.</p> <p>That's because the report shows that nearly 60 percent of reinfections are people who haven't gotten the shot.</p> <p>“It appears that affects reinfections,” Lindquist said.</p> <p>The majority of those reinfected are 18 to 34 years old, but the report says the majority of those reinfected who need to be hospitalized are still the folks who are 65 and older.</p> <p>“For someone my age, it’s particularly distressing,” said Pam LeBlanc, who lives in Anacortes.</p> <p>To LeBlanc, she wasn’t surprised to hear that reinfections are on the rise.</p>

	<p>“I think it was bound to happen,” LeBlanc said, “with the science, it’s going to end up like the flu for all of us.”</p> <p>Even still, she thinks we’d be in a better position if more folks got vaccinated.</p> <p>“I respect people’s decisions,” LeBlanc said, “however when it affects the greater public, I have to take issue with it.”</p> <p>“It’s keeping you out of the hospital and you’re not dying from it,” said Chris Finnigan, who lives in Whatcom County.</p> <p>Finnigan believes this will keep getting worse if stronger variants keep popping up.</p> <p>“With each variation,” he said, “it’s getting easier to get infected.”</p> <p>It’s important to note that reinfections are less than five percent of overall infections and only around five percent needed to be hospitalized, which is good, but considering the majority of those reinfected are unvaccinated, Lindquist says that the best way to avoid serious infections is to get that vaccine.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/07 Bloodworks Northwest: blood supply alarm
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/nations-blood-supply-hanging-by-a-thread-bloodworks-northwest-asking-for-donations
GIST	<p>The nation's blood supply is "hanging by a thread."</p> <p>According to Bloodworks Northwest, the country is currently experiencing the most prolonged blood shortage in recent years. Blood donors are needed right now, in Western Washington & Oregon.</p> <p>Jaclyn Schuenzel is sounding the alarm, along with Bloodworks Northwest. She used to give blood in college, but then, you know, life gets busy and there never seems to be the time to do it.</p> <p>Schuenzel's now got a different outlook on that, after experiencing her own code red for blood.</p> <p>As a teacher and performer at Seattle’s Theatre Sports, Schuenzel spends a lot of time on stage, in front of strangers, relying on their reactions and laughter to fuel her performance. While this is normal for someone in the theatre, relying on total strangers, to save your life is not.</p> <p>"When I gave blood in the past, I wasn’t thinking about all the people in the ER, in the operating room who are close to dying," she said.</p> <p>Schuenzel thinks of that now and is sharing her story, to help others see this way of looking at blood donations.</p> <p>Schuenzel said she and her husband, Marc Guy, had a very difficult time getting pregnant. Finally, it happened, and they had a healthy baby girl, in the summer of 2020, during the pandemic.</p> <p>Just a few weeks into caring for this new bundle of joy, Schuenzel said she almost left her daughter without a mom.</p> <p>"I was literally just sitting in my kitchen and I felt myself kind of start to bleed," Schuenzel said.</p> <p>She collapsed, her husband Marc starting CPR while waiting for an ambulance to arrive. At the hospital, doctors immediately started transfusing her with three units of blood. They were about to start a fourth when they rushed her into emergency surgery.</p>

"The specialist came in, he found the bleed my artery had ruptured and he was able to fix it within an hour but if I had not had that blood, I wouldn't have made it," said Schuenzel.

During the surgery, she needed even more blood.

"All I could think of is there's like 13 strangers out there who saved my life who I will never know who will never know me or my story or Zelda," said Schuenzel.

Given the repetitive blood shortages caused by storms, holidays, and COVID-19, Schuenzel is fortunate that the hospital had that much blood to spare at the critical moment she needed it.

"If I had not had that blood, I wouldn't have made it," she said.

This is why Schuenzel is now telling her story, when our local blood supply is at emergency low levels, yet again.

Right now, Bloodworks NW says it cannot fill all hospital orders with supplies of Type O and A which dropped to just a half-day supply. Hospitals are advised to conserve the limited onsite supplies to maintain a supply for emergencies.

"This is the most prolonged, most severe blood shortage in recent years, with little indication of significant improvement. Therefore, we could be hanging by a thread for months to come if our community doesn't take action," said Bloodworks Northwest Executive Vice President of Blood Services Vicki Finson.

She's asking all who can donate, to make appointments. Bloodworks has more than 1,000 appointments open over the next 10 days, that they need to have filled. Many of those are same-day appointments and can be booked with a phone call to 800-398-7888. COVID-19 exposures and recent storms have led to hundreds of potential donors, canceling appointments last minute.

The recent dramatic rise in the Omicron variant of COVID-19 means fewer donors are available to donate. Bloodworks says if you're feeling healthy, make an appointment and give. And they want donors to know, they can safely donate the same day they get a COVID vaccine booster.

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HEADLINE	01/07 Health officials warn businesses of impact
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/coronavirus/king-countys-top-health-official-sounds-covid-quarantine-alarm-for-businesses
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — As COVID-19 cases soar, King County's top health official on Friday issued a warning to business owners that their operations could be impacted if they have not made plans to manage high worker absenteeism for employees who need to quarantine after contracting COVID or being exposed to it.</p> <p>The blunt assessment is likely not what many businesses want to hear as they are looking to rebound from the pandemic and subsequent shutdowns.</p> <p>Bob Donegan of Ivar's Restaurants says over the first 20 months since the pandemic began he has had eight employees get sick. And he has had that many in just the last week.</p> <p>Although his company employees between 600 and 800 workers, he said he is ready to take action.</p> <p>"We may have to close earlier or open later," he said. "We'll share managers between stores. Managers who have three, four (or) five stores will work in the stores. We'll ask the people who are healthy to work more hours. But so far we have not had to face the issue of having to close yet."</p>

However, Dr. Jeff Duchin, Health Officer, Public Health — Seattle & King County, said workers who test positive and those who are unvaccinated and are exposed to COVID need to quarantine for five days.

That metric will impact anywhere from 10-20 percent of a business's workforce.

"So, I think everyone needs to plan for high levels of absenteeism and what that means for their operations and do whatever they can do to either prioritize the limited resources, human resources that they have for their most essential operations," he said. "Or plan to manage the best they can."

Dr. Anthony Chen, director of the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department said, "Certainly for small businesses when you've got a workforce of maybe 20 and a few of them call in sick and they were in contact with some other people who have to go home for quarantine. That could mean you have to shut down."

This all happening just as businesses were recovering from the rough months that resulted from the pandemic's early days.

"We were so happy in August, Donegan said. "The trends were favorable, our employment was getting back to where it was in 2019 and then delta hit and now we've got omicron hitting."

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HEADLINE	01/07 CDC: best time to get tested after exposure
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/cdc-covid-19-testing-exposure
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON - COVID-19 cases are spiking nationwide concerning the omicron variant, and testing is one of the vital tools used to help slow the spread of the virus.</p> <p>The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has a list of guidelines explaining optimal times to get tested after exposure to someone with COVID.</p> <p>According to the CDC, exposure is contact with someone infected with COVID-19 in a way that increases the likelihood of getting infected with the virus.</p> <p>Exposure to COVID-19 can happen in three ways:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Inhaling respiratory droplets and aerosol particles.2) Respiratory droplets and particles exposed on mucous membranes in the mouth, nose or eye by direct splashes and sprays.3) Touching mucous membranes with hands that have been soiled either directly by "virus-containing respiratory fluids" or indirectly by touching surfaces with the virus on them. <p>Close contact with a person infected with COVID-19 is another way the virus is transmissible.</p> <p>According to the CDC, close contact refers to an individual less than six feet away from an individual infected with COVID for 15 minutes or more over 24 hours. An infected person can spread COVID beginning two days before they have symptoms.</p> <p>Best times to get tested for COVID</p> <p>People who have come into close contact with someone with COVID are urged to get tested at least five days after they last had close contact with the individual with the virus. The date of the last close contact is considered day zero.</p> <p>The CDC recommends that fully vaccinated people get tested for the virus five to seven days after close contact with a person suspected or confirmed with having COVID-19.</p> <p>According to the CDC, individuals who have tested positive for COVID-19 within the past three months and recovered do not have to get tested as long as they do not develop new symptoms.</p>

Individuals who develop virus symptoms have to [get tested](#) immediately and must isolate until they receive their test results. The CDC says if you test positive, it's important to follow [isolation](#) guidelines.

If an individual tests negative for COVID, the CDC says they're allowed leave to leave home, but must wear a [well-fitting mask](#) when around others at home and in public until 10 days after last close contact with a person with COVID.

The CDC recommends people who test positive for the virus isolate for at least five days from the date of their positive test. If you develop [COVID-19 symptoms](#), you must isolate for at least five days from the date your symptoms began.

Types of tests available to detect COVID

[COVID tests](#) can inform you if you have an infection at the time of testing, which is known as a viral test. These tests are used to search for viral infections. Viral tests involve the use of samples that come from your nose and mouth, according to the CDC.

Two commonly used viral tests are [rapid tests](#) and [laboratory tests](#)

The CDC says rapid tests are conducted in minutes and can include an antigen, a substance foreign to the body to draw out an immune response, and nucleic acid amplification tests (NAATs) which is a type of viral diagnostic test for COVID-19.

Laboratory tests commonly known as PCR tests can take several days to complete. Self-tests are quick COVID tests administered at home or anywhere a rapid test result can be recorded.

Tests for antibodies detect if you've had a past infection from COVID-19. The CDC states that your body creates antibodies after getting infected with COVID or if vaccinated. This is called an antibody test.

[Antibody tests](#) detect antibodies to COVID-19 in your blood. According to the CDC, antibodies are proteins that your immune system produces to help fight infection and protect you from getting sick.

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HEADLINE	01/07 Hospitalizations soar: too young for shots
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/hospitalizations-skyrocket-in-kids-too-young-for-covid-shots
GIST	<p>Hospitalizations of U.S. children under 5 with COVID-19 soared in recent weeks to their highest level since the pandemic began, according to government data released Friday on the only age group not yet eligible for the vaccine.</p> <p>The worrisome trend in children too young to be vaccinated underscores the need for older kids and adults to get their shots to protect those around them, said Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>Since mid-December, as the highly contagious omicron variant has spread furiously around the country, the hospitalization rate in these youngest children has surged to more than 4 in 100,000 youngsters, up from 2.5 per 100,000.</p> <p>That compares with a current rate of about 1 per 100,000 for children ages 5 to 17, according to CDC data.</p> <p>In a statement, Walensky said that while children still have the lowest rate of hospitalization of any age group, "pediatric hospitalizations are at their highest rate compared to any prior point in the pandemic."</p> <p>At a briefing, she said the numbers include children hospitalized because of COVID-19 and those admitted for other reasons but found to be infected.</p>

She noted that just over 50% of children ages 12 to 18 are fully vaccinated and only 16% of those 5 to 11 are fully vaccinated.

As of Tuesday, the average number of children and teens admitted to the hospital per day with COVID-19 was 766, double the figure reported just two weeks ago.

At a White House briefing this week, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert, said many children hospitalized with COVID-19 have other health conditions that make them more susceptible to complications from the virus. That includes obesity, diabetes and lung disease.

Fauci and Walensky have emphasized that one of the best ways to protect the youngest children is to vaccinate everyone else.

Data suggest booster shots offer the best protection against omicron, and CDC this week recommended them for kids as young as 12. Among older ages already eligible, just 34% have received them.

The surge in hospitalizations only heightens the concerns of parents worried about how to keep their infants and toddlers safe.

Emily Hojara and Eli Zilke of Sawyer, Michigan, are being extra protective of their daughter Flora, who turns 2 in May. They limit her contact with other children, and no visitors are allowed in the house unless masked, not even grandparents.

"It's been a struggle, and now with this new variant, I feel it's knocked us back," Hojara said. She said the new hospitalization data "just reminds you that that anxiety is hovering really close."

"It's scary that she can't be vaccinated," Hojara said of her daughter.

Dr. Jennifer Kusma, a pediatrician with Chicago's Lurie Children's Hospital, said she has seen increasing numbers of kids hospitalized with omicron, and while most aren't severely ill, she understands parents' worries.

"As a pediatrician, I really wish we already had that vaccine for these young kids," Kusma said. But she added that what may seem like a long wait should reassure parents that vaccine testing is not being rushed.

Many had hoped the new year might bring a vaccine for young children, but Pfizer announced last month that two doses didn't offer as much protection as hoped for in youngsters ages 2 to 4.

Pfizer's study has been updated to give everyone under 5 a third dose, and data is expected in early spring.

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HEADLINE	01/07 MIS-C fears rise with pediatric Covid cases
SOURCE	https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2022-01-07/record-breaking-coronavirus-infections-among-children-prompts-concerns-of-mis-c
GIST	<p>Coronavirus cases and hospitalizations among children are at an all-time high, prompting worries over a rare but serious syndrome that shows up in kids several weeks after COVID-19 infections.</p> <p>MIS-C, or multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children, is a condition associated with COVID-19 in which different parts of the body become inflamed, including the heart, lungs, kidneys, brain, skin, eyes or gastrointestinal organs, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The cause of the syndrome is not known.</p> <p>The syndrome typically shows up two to six weeks after COVID-19 infection, and its symptoms include fever, stomach pain, bloodshot eyes, diarrhea, dizziness, skin rash and vomiting.</p>

While MIS-C is rare – the CDC has [documented](#) over 6,400 MIS-C cases and 55 deaths as of Jan. 3. – the current surge of coronavirus cases among children likely means more MIS-C cases will soon show up.

“If you have more children getting [COVID-19] then you'll end up seeing more MIS-C,” says Sophie Katz of the Vanderbilt University Medical Center. “I think that's just what's going to happen.”

The CDC reports that the median age of patients with MIS-C was 9 years old, and half of the children with the syndrome were between the ages of 5 and 13 years old. The majority of reported patients were male.

MIS-C has been reported in every state. Georgia and California report the most cases, at over 400. Of particular concern with MIS-C is inflammation of the heart.

“Whenever that happens, usually we see children who are pretty seriously ill – kind of in shock – and their heart ... doesn't pump quite as well as it normally should,” says Katz, who is an assistant professor of pediatric infectious diseases.

The average hospitalization stay with MIS-C is five days. Katz says that around 98% of patients with MIS-C are back to normal by their one-month check up.

Most patients do well with treatment, which can include intravenous immunoglobulin and steroids, according to Katz.

But with more children getting coronavirus as the highly transmissible omicron variant spreads, more are likely to get MIS-C, too.

“Every pediatrician I know is anxious that we're going to see large surges in both [COVID-19] and MIS-C cases after [the holidays],” Wendy Hasson, a pediatric intensive care unit doctor in Portland, Oregon, who is also a spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatrics, [told](#) U.S. News last month.

So when will experts know if omicron leads to an increase in MIS-C? Katz says a spike would be delayed three to four weeks after a coronavirus surge.

“I am sort of bracing myself for higher numbers of MIS-C with this omicron wave in about a month or so,” Katz says.

Coronavirus cases among kids are at “the highest case count ever reported since the start of the pandemic,” according to a [report](#) from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Children’s Hospital Association.

More than 325,000 pediatric infections were reported in the week leading up to Dec. 30, according to the report. That’s nearly a 65% increase over the week prior.

“Nearly 7.9 million children have tested positive for COVID-19 since the onset of the pandemic, representing over 1 in 10 US children,” the report said.

Despite already reaching record levels, more infections among children are expected, experts [warn](#).

Leading infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci this week said that while the highly contagious omicron variant appears to cause a [more mild disease](#) than delta, “the sheer volume of infections because of its profound transmissibility mean that many more children will get infected.”

“As many more children will get infected, a certain proportion of them – usually children that have underlying comorbidities – are going to wind up in the hospital,” Fauci said during a press briefing. “That is just an inevitability.”

Something to watch, Katz says, is more MIS-C cases popping up in kids who did not know they previously had COVID-19. Many MIS-C cases occur in kids who had mild COVID-19 symptoms or who were asymptomatic, and that trend is expected to continue with the omicron variant.

While the CDC has [encouraged](#) parents to get their kids vaccinated against the coronavirus in order to protect against MIS-C, vaccination rates among children remain well below what experts would like to see.

Only 16% of kids 5-11 are fully vaccinated, and just over half of kids ages 12-17 are fully vaccinated, according to CDC [data](#). A vaccine has not yet been authorized for children under the age of 5.

Vaccine uptake among 5- to 11-year-olds and 12- to 17-year-olds has [significantly slowed](#), according to a [survey](#) from Kaiser Family Foundation published last month.

A new [study](#) published by the CDC on Friday found that the Pfizer coronavirus vaccine was highly effective at preventing MIS-C in children ages 12-18.

Among the 102 MIS-C cases the study examined, 95% of patients were unvaccinated. All of the patients who needed life support were unvaccinated, according to the study.

“This analysis lends supportive evidence that vaccination of children and adolescents is highly protective against MIS-C and COVID-19 and underscores the importance of vaccination of all eligible children,” the researchers wrote.

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HEADLINE	01/07 Questionable testing sites pop-up
SOURCE	https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2022/01/07/center-covid-control-testing-americans-describe-long-waits/9133310002/
GIST	<p>CHICAGO – Out of a small generator-powered shack on the city's north side, a man periodically emerges to hand COVID-19 testing kits to people waiting in cars or shivering in the parking lot.</p> <p>As he opens the door, piles of plastic bags, apparently grouped by test type, can be seen in crates on the ground. He encourages test-takers to scan a QR code with their phones, fill out an online form with identifying information and write a digitally-generated string of numbers on a paper sheet inside the plastic test kit bag.</p> <p>Test-takers swab their noses and hand over the bags, free of charge. Some say they receive results many days later than promised – if they hear back at all.</p> <p>As Americans nationwide continue to scramble for access to quick, reliable COVID-19 tests amid a national shortage, state and local authorities are warning residents to be on the lookout for fraudulent pop-up sites trying to scam people out of money and personal information. Some regretful test-takers spoke to USA TODAY about a particular string of testing centers: the so-called "Center for COVID Control."</p> <p>The Center for COVID Control operates more than 300 locations across at least 29 states, according to the company's website. The locations pop up on Google maps searches with minimal information about the testing site beyond location and hours. The website claims the company is "partnered with a CDC approved & licensed laboratory" but does not specify which lab.</p> <p>A Twitter account linking to the website has no followers and was created in March of last year. "We also offer rapid test for \$100," the Twitter bio says.</p> <p>An Instagram account linked from the website goes by the handle "freecovidtest" and first began posting in December, 2020. Multiple users have commented on posts to the account, calling the testing site a "scam" and "fake."</p>

Minneapolis resident Christina Weber, 31, a full-time server, said she Googled "free COVID testing near me" and saw a Center for COVID Control site pop up on Google Maps. When she drove down to the site to get a test at the end of December, the site was located a block away from the address listed online.

"It was just a pop-up. There was one man running the whole thing, and he was in his scrubs," Weber said Friday. "The area where you waited was the same area where people were testing, and the chairs weren't spaced out. And some of the guests weren't wearing masks."

Weber said a man stormed into the site while she was there and started yelling that he hadn't gotten his results. She said she was instructed to self-administer a test and drop the plastic bag into a tray overflowing with about 50 other bags. She left the site feeling uneasy and decided to get a second test at another location.

After she didn't hear back for several days, Weber said she began posting complaints on the site's social media pages, which she believes prompted the testing site to email her results, which were sent from "results@dcltesting.com." While the result from the Center for COVID Control was negative, the result she received from the second test that day was positive, Weber said.

"I felt like they just sent the negative results," Weber said. "I got upset and worried thinking they're gonna kill somebody if they keep sending out these false negatives."

Weber said she reported the testing site to local officials and was later contacted by an investigator for the Minnesota Attorney General's Office, who informed her that she was not the first to report issues with the testing site. The office did not immediately respond to USA TODAY request for comment.

USA TODAY attempted to contact the Center for COVID Control via the main phone line listed on its website over the course of three days and was given over an hour wait each time. USA TODAY also called an additional phone line listed for the company in public records but was unable to leave a voicemail.

The company's principal and mailing address is the same Rolling Meadows address, a one-story commercial office building about 15 miles northwest of O'Hare International Airport.

The manager of the Center for COVID Control is Aleya Siyaj of Rolling Meadows, Illinois, according to the Florida and Illinois Secretaries of State. In Florida, the company's registered agent is Fawzia Safdari of Davie, Florida. Siyaj and Safdari did not respond to USA TODAY voicemails or email request for comment.

Scores of Center for COVID Control locations are in the Chicago area, according to the website. Dozens more are reportedly in Florida and Texas. The company registered in Illinois, Florida and Washington at the end of 2021, according to records from the respective Secretaries of State.

Florida's attorney general issued a [statement](#) Thursday warning about new and re-emerging COVID-19 test scams. The statement, which did not name the Center for COVID Control, cited "recent reports of suspicious COVID-19 testing sites popping up in Illinois" that "appear legitimate but are designed to steal personal information from unsuspecting test seekers."

Asked about the company's testing sites in Florida, Florida's Agency for Health Care Administration did not immediately respond to request for comment. The Florida Department of Health, speaking generally, said "Floridians are urged to be on the lookout for fraudulent COVID-19 products and practices, especially as it pertains to testing."

Washington State has received two complaints about the company, according to the Washington State Attorney General's Office. People in Chicago, Houston and Rochester, New York, told USA TODAY they experienced issues with Center for COVID Control testing sites.

In a press conference Monday, Dr. Ngozi Ezike, director of the Illinois Department of Public Health, urged caution for residents getting tested at pop-up sites. The Illinois Department of Health maintains [a list](#) of bonafide community testing sites, Ezike said. The Center for COVID Control is not on that list.

"There unfortunately are those who are taking advantage of these crazy times to try to scam people," she said.

Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker said some testing sites are returning test results after long delays or not at all. Pritzker said his office relayed the issue to the Illinois attorney general's office for further investigation. Asked if the Center for COVID Control was part of that investigation, the Illinois attorney general's office did not immediately respond.

At least two people complained about the Center for COVID Control testing sites to the Oregon Department of Justice, spokesperson Kristina Edmunson said. The complaints reviewed by USA TODAY ring similar to Weber's account.

"I have not received results and have grown concerned that I fell victim to a scam," one person said. "The test site also felt very fishy, when I arrived it was just a tent with a couple people standing around a convenience store parking lot, and I was given the test kit to perform on myself in my car."

Another person alleged the site billed their insurance for a test, which was labeled as having expired in June of 2021.

"This is very concerning to me as a pandemic-conscientious citizen. I got tested because I had respiratory symptoms that could be Covid or could be an unusual burst of allergies," the complaint said. "The expired rapid test came up Negative, but was I REALLY definitely Negative?"

The Oregon Department of Justice does not have an open investigation, Edmunson said.

The Texas Department of State Health Services had "not heard" of the company, spokesperson Douglas Loveday said.

In Brazos County, Texas, a local police officer noticed two testing sites operated by the Center for COVID Control pop up last week, Brazos County Health District spokesperson Mary Parrish told USA TODAY.

"They do not have any agreement with the Texas Department of State Health Services, and they have not been reporting their cases to us," Parrish said. "The reason that's concerning is because not only do we not get cases reported to us, but it goes against the governor's executive order."

Parrish said county health district officials have struggled to contact representatives of the testing sites.

"One of our managers spent over three and a half hours yesterday on hold trying to speak with someone from COVID Control. Even then, he was kind of given the run-around," Parrish said.

The district official contacted the Center for COVID Control through the main phone line and was transferred to a manager identified only as "Ash," Parrish said.

Parrish said the manager informed the district the company was "working with their IT department to put plans in place to get on board with the state and secure data safely."

As of Friday afternoon, the company had not made testing results available to the health district, Parrish said.

	<p>"The next steps for us really is just going to be keeping a watchful eye on them. We don't have the authority to close them down. Really all we can do is watch and wait see what happens. This is not an approach we like to take in the field of public health," Parrish said.</p> <p>Asked about the company, the FDA said: "The FDA regulates and reviews COVID-19 diagnostics. Companies providing testing services are not within the FDA's purview."</p> <p>A test given to a USA TODAY reporter at a Chicago location Sunday – in red transparent vial – was taped with the label "SNT Biotech." According to the company's website, SNT Biotech is "a DBA of Saris and Things, Inc." Saris and Things is a Plainfield, Illinois, company that sells saris, lehengas, anarkalis and sherwanis, according to the website.</p> <p>Shital Daftari, founder and owner of Saris and Things and SNT Biotech, said her company sources swabs, tubes and masks and other supplies from the U.S., Finland and elsewhere and sells to labs and testing sites in the Chicago area. She said the Center for COVID Control "bought a few supplies from us in the past." Daftari said her company is not a lab and does not process the tests.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/07 Unprecedented impact supply-chain turmoil
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-studies-find-unprecedented-impact-from-supply-chain-turmoil-11641587220?mod=hp_minor_pos13
GIST	<p>International shipping costs have swung far more sharply during the pandemic and amid recent supply-chain disruptions than in the wake of the financial crisis over a decade ago, according to a report by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.</p> <p>The St. Louis Fed's analysis seeks to measure the impact the turmoil of the past two years has had on an increasingly critical piece of the global economy.</p> <p>Prices for moving goods by ocean from China to the U.S. West Coast swung more than 72 percentage points from an early-pandemic low to a peak in 2021's third quarter of more than 50% above the long-term trend for container shipping rates, researchers at the regional Fed bank wrote in the report released this week.</p> <p>That compares with a 41 percentage-point swing in the aftermath of the recession triggered by the 2007-2008 financial crisis, when shipping prices peaked in 2010 at just over 14% above the long-term trend, according to the report, which used import data from the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis and an index of freight rates from a shipping service provider.</p> <p>The St. Louis Fed analysis said supply and demand forces have driven just over half of the increase in rates since mid-2020, a period that has seen shipping demand surge as retailers have rushed to restock inventories that had been depleted during the pandemic. The report attributed the rest to disruptions in shipping operations that have been roiled by issues such as port congestion.</p> <p>"In the Great Recession, somehow prices didn't respond so much," said St. Louis Fed Bank economist Fernando Leibovici, who co-wrote the report with research associate Jason Dunn. During the pandemic, he said, "there's definitely a role being played by supply factors."</p> <p>The report is one of the latest in a series of attempts by economic policy makers to assess the impact of supply-chain strains after nearly two years of turbulence during the pandemic, as issues ranging from commodities costs and the availability of raw materials to transportation costs have affected the global economy.</p> <p>Economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, writing on the bank's Liberty Street Economics blog this week, have developed a Global Supply Chain Pressure Index pulling together a range of</p>

	<p>measures “to provide a more comprehensive summary of potential disruptions affecting global supply chains.”</p> <p>Their measure, using data going back to 1997, showed supply-chain pressures swinging dramatically during the pandemic far outside the long-term trend lines and reaching a new high in October 2021. A slip back from that high the following month “seems to suggest that global supply chain pressures, while still historically high, have peaked and might start to moderate somewhat going forward,” the New York Fed economists wrote.</p> <p>Various shipping-sector measures show maritime prices climbed over the past year to record highs. The global price of shipping a 40-foot container rose from around \$1,400 at the start of the pandemic to over \$11,000 in September, according to an index from shipping technology firm Freightos.</p> <p>Chris Rogers, principal supply-chain economist at freight forwarder Flexport Inc., said the St. Louis Fed research shows “we’re firmly in uncharted territory in terms of how far rates have gone up.”</p> <p>He said the major driver of rising rates remains the strong consumer demand for goods that is swamping transportation networks. “If it was just a port closure here or there, or just some shortage of trucking here or there, you wouldn’t have seen anything near the kinds of challenges or elevation in rates that we’ve actually seen,” Mr. Rogers said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/07 Frustration: unable to get Covid tests
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/unable-to-get-covid-19-tests-americans-carry-on-go-to-work-get-on-flights-11641551403?mod=hp_trending_now_article_pos2
GIST	<p>Stephanie Chen has been working in the office in Orange County, Calif., each day, taking her 5-year-old son to school, attending church and going about her routine for nine days, all while wondering if she is positive for Covid-19.</p> <p>When Ms. Chen learned that her cousin’s entire family tested positive for the virus after a Christmas gathering she attended with them in Orange County, pharmacies were sold out of rapid tests. Lines exceeded two hours at a local testing site. A Rite Aid website said no appointments were available within 50 miles of her home for at least two weeks.</p> <p>Ms. Chen, 38, who isn’t symptomatic, tried to order a home-delivered PCR test through a Los Angeles County program, but so far hasn’t even received confirmation it is on its way. “I’m just frustrated because they’re telling us, ‘Go test, go test,’ but how do you do that if the resources aren’t available?” Ms. Chen said.</p> <p>As soaring demand makes lab-based and at-home tests hard to come by, many people are forsaking tests, leaving them unable to determine whether they are infected and potentially exposing others. Those who manage to get at-home rapid tests rarely report the results to health departments, often because the means to do so is cumbersome or nonexistent. As a result, public-health officials lack the full picture of the virus’s spread when the Omicron variant is raging.</p> <p>Throughout the pandemic, testing volume in the U.S. has fallen short of the level public-health specialists recommend, said Atul Grover, executive director of the Research and Action Institute at the Association of American Medical Colleges. During the current surge, in which test positivity rates have reached double digits in many areas, the gap is even greater, he said.</p> <p>“We are definitely missing people and undertesting,” Dr. Grover said.</p> <p>The seven-day average for new lab-based Covid-19 tests in the U.S. recently reached as high as about 1.8 million, according to federal data, edging above the peak during the recent Delta variant-fueled surge, but</p>

not as high as the one during the winter surge a year ago. Meanwhile, the percentage of tests coming back positive has soared above any previous mark, recently reaching more than one in five tests nationally.

Across the country, people are contending with hourslong waits at some testing sites. Some governments are rushing to reopen mass-testing sites that they closed when case counts were lower. Many are struggling to refresh supplies of at-home rapid tests.

“We’re two years into this pandemic and we’re seeing the same challenges we saw in the winter and spring of 2020,” said Thomas Denny, chief operating officer of the Duke Human Vaccine Institute. “It’s like the perfect storm again.”

When Alyssa Kessler hosted family at her home in Bozeman, Mont., for the holidays, her throat began feeling scratchy, and by Christmas Eve, it was clear she was sick. She took the only rapid Covid-19 test she had at home, and after testing positive, immediately isolated in her bedroom.

The five family members staying with her tried to find at-home tests, but all the local pharmacies were sold out. Many PCR testing sites were closed for the holidays and wouldn’t have provided results ahead of her family members’ return flights anyway.

“We finally just gave up and said, ‘Hey, what will be will be,’ ” said Ms. Kessler, a 35-year-old e-commerce company employee. “I think there’s probably a lot of people out there that had it and didn’t get tested.”

When she sought to get a PCR test the following week so her case could be counted, Ms. Kessler said, a nurse at her local urgent-care clinic said it would be a waste of time and money.

President Biden said Tuesday that in the past two weeks, the federal government has opened testing sites around the country and [is working to launch a website](#) later this month where people can request free at-home test kits.

“I know this remains frustrating,” he said. “But we’re making improvements.”

In Washington state, the Department of Health in August added a capacity to its hotline that allows people to report results from at-home tests, said Deputy Secretary Lacy Fehrenbach. Since then, more than 1,000 people have done so.

The department distributed nearly 20,000 at-home tests in 2021 and has been trying to replenish supplies. But an order for more kits that the department placed in November is still only about 10% fulfilled, Ms. Fehrenbach said. On Wednesday, Gov. Jay Inslee said the state had just received 800,000 at-home tests and expected another 4.7 million in the next week or two.

In Los Angeles County, a hotline set up for people who have tested positive with at-home tests and have questions about isolating or contact tracing isn’t designed to record data on positive cases, said Dr. Barbara Ferrer, director of the Department of Public Health.

“We’re not trying to count, I’ll be honest,” she said. “We have always lived with the reality that our numbers underrepresent the true burden of this disease.”

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HEADLINE	01/07 FAA selects airports for 5G buffer zones
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/faa-selects-airports-for-5g-buffer-zones-11641609361?mod=hp_list_pos2
GIST	U.S. air-safety regulators have picked dozens of airports that would get buffer zones to help avoid expected flight disruptions once a new 5G wireless service goes live later this month.

The 50 airports selected by the Federal Aviation Administration on Friday include hubs for major U.S. passenger airlines such as Chicago's O'Hare International and Dallas Love Field. They also include airports prone to fog and clouds, like San Francisco International and Seattle-Tacoma International.

The FAA, which manages U.S. civilian airspace, also has been [preparing to issue flight restrictions](#) to address its concerns that the new 5G service slated to go live Jan. 19 could possibly interfere with aircraft safety systems near airports. The flight limits, expected to be issued as soon as next week, could lead to some cancellations and delays in bad weather, industry and government officials have said.

The buffer-zone locations, detailed by the agency Friday, are also slated for cargo hubs like airports in Indianapolis. Northern New Jersey's Teterboro, a hub for private jets, made the cut, in addition to the major New York City airports.

In selecting airports, the agency said it considered factors such as their traffic volumes, locations and number of days with low visibility. The agency said it continues to work with aerospace manufacturers and wireless companies "to make sure 5G is safely deployed and to limit the risk of flight disruptions at all airports."

U.S. wireless executives have disputed claims that new 5G signals pose any safety risk to aircraft but have acknowledged the need to avoid disrupting air traffic.

A spokesman for Airlines for America, which represents major U.S. passenger and cargo carriers, said the group appreciated the FAA's work to lessen 5G disruptions at airports. He declined to comment about specific airports that didn't make the list.

Some airports, such as Hartsfield-Jackson in Atlanta, aren't on the list because they are in areas where the new 5G service isn't initially rolling out, the FAA said.

Other large airports, including those in Boston, Portland, Ore., and Salt Lake City, didn't make the final list. The FAA said "5G towers are far enough away that a natural buffer exists" at some airports. An agency spokesman declined to address specific airports.

Kevin Burke, chief executive of the airport trade group Airports Council International-North America, said the FAA's list was largely irrelevant. "This so-called fix will create winners and losers within the airport community, and the entire aviation system will suffer," Mr. Burke said.

On Jan. 3, after negotiations with federal transportation officials, [AT&T Inc.](#) and [Verizon Communications Inc.](#), agreed to [further delay the rollout](#) of their new, faster 5G service in the spectrum range known as the C-band by two weeks until Jan. 19.

The wireless carriers also agreed to limit their signals around up to 50 airports for six months while the FAA works with aerospace manufacturers and airlines to validate that their aircraft can safely operate with the new cell service.

The FAA [has been worried about possible 5G interference](#) with radar altimeters, which measure the distance between aircraft and the ground. The devices feed data to key cockpit systems that help planes land in poor weather and otherwise prevent crashes.

"As tests prove that some altimeters are safe, the FAA will be able to remove some restrictions on operations of aircraft with those altimeters," the agency said on its website. "Disruption risk will gradually decrease as more altimeters are tested and either deemed safe, retrofitted or replaced."

U.S. airlines have recently been facing [other operational challenges](#) from winter weather and Covid-related staffing shortages.

HEADLINE	01/08 Mass vaccination sites are back
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/mass-vaccination-sites-for-covid-19-are-back-11641646804?mod=hp_lead_pos10
GIST	<p>Public officials across the country are reopening temporary mass-vaccination sites that they wound down months ago, in an effort to get more people vaccinated and boosted in the latest Covid-19 surge driven by the Omicron variant.</p> <p>Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Oregon and Rhode Island are among states that have opened or are planning soon to open sites designed to administer hundreds or even thousands of shots a day. The locations include Boston's Fenway Park, malls, a casino and convention centers.</p> <p>Many states phased out mass vaccination sites last summer and shifted to smaller, more-targeted inoculation efforts after demand waned among adults eligible to receive their first shots.</p> <p>"Going into the summer, we started to have a little bit of hope," said Rachel Seeber, a member of the Warren County Board of Supervisors in upstate New York, who pressed to have a clinic reopened in a former Sears store there.</p> <p>Officials say they are expanding capacity again largely to provide booster shots and reach children who recently became eligible for vaccines.</p> <p>Of Americans 5 years or older who are eligible to be vaccinated, 66.3% are fully vaccinated, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About 38% of fully vaccinated adults have received booster shots.</p> <p>Some of the vaccination locations are also offering Covid-19 testing.</p> <p>Officials running the mass vaccination sites say they also hope to reach some of the 27% of adults who aren't fully vaccinated against Covid-19, according to CDC data. Interest among unvaccinated adults hasn't risen during the Omicron surge, though, a recent survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation found.</p> <p>Officials say traffic has been fairly brisk at the resurrected large clinics, though not as high as it was in the spring when millions of adults were getting their first shots.</p> <p>The state-led "Burlington County Covid-19 Vaccine Mega-Site" reopened on Nov. 30 in a large A.C. Moore store in New Jersey after closing down in a nearby mall in July, and is averaging 1,000 people a day, according to the health system managing it. That is up from about 200 people a day in early December; between 50 and 100 adults are getting a Covid-19 vaccine for the first time.</p> <p>"In speaking with people, it's clear the Omicron variant has folks concerned," said Phyllis Worrell, emergency preparedness coordinator for Virtua Health, which is running the site alongside the state and county.</p> <p>Oregon is ramping up its high-volume vaccine clinics and expects to have 10 running in coming days, the largest of which could administer up to 2,000 or 3,000 shots a day, said Dean Sidelinger, the health officer and epidemiologist for the state of Oregon. The state is aiming to give 1 million new booster shots to its population of 4.2 million by the end of the month.</p> <p>"It's kind of all hands on deck so that we can make sure that if someone is ready to get their vaccine—first dose, second dose, extra dose or booster dose—that we can have a site fairly convenient for them where they can get it, so that that's not the barrier for them," Dr. Sidelinger said.</p> <p>Pharmacies and healthcare clinics are still providing many vaccines but have also become strained as eligibility for shots has widened fairly rapidly, Dr. Sidelinger said. In upstate New York, where a new mass clinic recently reopened, county officials said they were hearing from small doctors' offices that were overwhelmed with vaccine appointments.</p>

	<p>The U.S. has recently averaged about 1.1 million new doses a day, federal data show, which includes people receiving boosters.</p> <p>There are challenges with restarting large-scale community vaccination efforts, including a Covid-19-related healthcare staffing crunch that is tying up medical workers who participated in the big vaccine rollout last time, Dr. Sidelinger said.</p> <p>To ease similar staffing pressures in Illinois, Gov. J.B. Pritzker recently said he is sending personnel to help local health departments run mass vaccination operations. In Rhode Island, the National Guard is staffing a large site that just opened at a convention center.</p> <p>The seven-day average for new cases in the U.S. topped 600,000 for the first time on Thursday, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. The U.S. has more than doubled the peak number of cases seen in last winter's surge, even as testing issues make it difficult to track the numbers.</p> <p>Hospitalizations for confirmed or suspected Covid-19 cases reached a seven-day average of 121,600 Friday, according to data posted by the U.S. Health and Human Services Department. The number has been rising fast, but hasn't reached the pandemic peak of 137,510 on Jan. 10, 2021.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 Pandemic offers towns challenges, hope
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/for-dying-towns-the-pandemic-offers-challengesand-hope-11641643202?mod=hp_lead_pos9
GIST	<p>SAN XOÁN DE RIO, Spain—The small building in a village near this town was once a school filled with children. Now it is a mortuary, a stark illustration of the demographic forces shaping Europe's future.</p> <p>It has been years since there were enough children to sustain a local school in many villages in this rural corner of Galicia, northwestern Spain, that have been hollowed out over decades by migration to cities and low birthrates. Other defunct schools have been left to crumble, or in some cases repurposed as social centers for the elderly, who now make up a majority of the population.</p> <p>If Europe is already the world's oldest continent—with a median age of 44 in 2020, forecast to reach 48 by 2050—parts of this region are a sign of the future. The average age in some municipalities in the province of Ourense, where San Xoán de Rio is located, is already above 60.</p> <p>For years, mayors of such towns have struggled to prevent their communities from dying out. The pandemic offers a new challenge, but also some glimmers of hope.</p> <p>The long-term impact of Covid-19 on demographic trends looms large. Birthrates across Europe fell during the first year of the pandemic, amplifying a trend that is set to have far-reaching consequences for economies across the continent, with a shrinking pool of working-age people forced to support a growing elderly population.</p> <p>While birthrates have since rebounded in some countries, restrictions on international travel have reduced the flow of migrants into Europe. That deprives Europe of new arrivals whose higher fertility rates have been critical in keeping the population of some European countries from falling even faster.</p> <p>At the same time, the pandemic has driven some people out of cities to rural municipalities where Europe's demographic challenges are most pronounced. In Spain, the share of housing transactions that were in rural municipalities rose to 15% in September 2020 from 11% between January 2013 and December 2019.</p> <p>The pandemic came just in time for the municipality of Vilariño de Conso, whose nursery was at risk after the number of children slipped below the minimum threshold of six. "We've been on the brink for several</p>

years,” said Mayor Melisa Macia Dominguez. The return of several young couples over the course of the pandemic added five children to the register, guaranteeing the nursery’s survival for the next few years at least. “It has given us breathing space,” she said.

Now looking to rebuild its economy after the pandemic, the national government in Spain—where birthrates haven’t recovered from the pandemic decline—is pledging a slice of billions of dollars in European Union structural funds toward addressing rural depopulation, a hot political issue.

As Spain went into lockdown in 2020, a trickle of people returned to San Xoán de Rio. The numbers were relatively small, but every head counts in a place where there are at most two births a year and 10 times as many deaths. For the first time since 1950, the population didn’t shrink in the first year of the pandemic, stabilizing at about 500 inhabitants, and was on track to have grown slightly in 2021.

The question now is whether Mayor Jose Miguel Perez can build on those gains as people learn to live with the virus and old habits re-emerge. “We need to keep them,” he said.

There isn’t much Mr. Perez can do to boost falling fertility rates, a trend that has vexed policy makers across Europe for decades. Nor does he have the means of some wealthier municipalities, which he says have offered parents financial incentives to settle with their children. But he hopes the pandemic has given him a fighting chance.

Mr. Perez opened a remote working center at the height of the pandemic that he says was in high demand over the summer when many people return to spend their holidays here. He also set up a kids summer camp and a paddle tennis court.

Reviving the local school is a coveted—if distant—goal. “Children are the future,” Mr. Perez said.

The school closed 12 years ago when the number of pupils fell below a minimum threshold of six. But at least 15 children are needed for local authorities to reopen it, and there are only eight in the whole of the municipality of San Xoán de Rio, covering about 50 villages in an area of about 25 square miles.

Last year, he cleared desks coated with more than a decade of dust out of the classrooms and turned the school into an indoor playground, part of his long-term strategy to foster a sense of attachment to the town in the younger generation. If he succeeds, Mr. Perez hopes there will one day be enough children to restore the school to its original purpose.

For now, he is focused on the more modest goal of getting people to visit more often or stay longer during the holidays to stimulate the local economy.

Decades of population loss have sent this and other small towns like it into a downward economic spiral.

One by one, businesses in San Xoán de Rio have closed as their owners retire, making life increasingly difficult for the remaining residents. Along the main street, a handful of surviving businesses stand out among closed stores that used to be a supermarket, a restaurant and a local bank branch. To withdraw money, residents must now drive more than 8 miles to the closest ATM or wait until a Thursday, when a mobile bank bus passes through town.

The biggest employer is a care home for the elderly. Real-estate prices have slumped, with one exception: burial plots. Life moves slowly in San Xoán de Rio, revolving around a medical center and a bar.

“It’s like an open-air retirement home,” said Mr. Perez, who at 39 is among the town’s younger residents. Many of the people who returned during the pandemic were themselves retired.

Alberto Lopez Perez, 39, quit his job at a car factory in Madrid and returned here with his wife, who gave birth eight months ago. Becoming parents has brought the challenges of living here into sharp relief; the couple was forced to register their newborn in another municipality because he needs regular medical care

	<p>and there is no pediatrician in San Xoán de Río. In the future, Mr. Lopez Perez fears his son will struggle to find work, like he has.</p> <p>“You can either work for the town hall or the care home,” said Mr. Lopez Perez, who is eking out a living from beekeeping and doing odd jobs for the town hall.</p> <p>“Or as a gravedigger,” quipped Luis Fernandez Lopez, 34, who works for the local funeral services.</p> <p>Agriculture is no longer viable for most and the mayor’s efforts to lobby companies to move to this remote region have met with little success.</p> <p>The mayor, a former telecommunications engineer, has made better progress toward connecting San Xoán de Río with the rest of the province by bringing high-speed internet to the municipality.</p> <p>For older residents, many of whom have never used a computer, the town hall is now offering computer literacy courses. Amazon delivery vehicles—once a rare sight—are now spotted daily on the roads as the pandemic accelerates a shift toward online shopping.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 Omicron surge threatens India's hospitals
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-fuels-fresh-surge-threatening-indias-hospitals-anew-11641649808?mod=hp_lead_pos8
GIST	<p>NEW DELHI—With less than half of India’s population fully vaccinated against Covid-19 and Omicron-variant infections rising rapidly, public-health experts warn that the healthcare system is again vulnerable—months after being overwhelmed by a surge of cases.</p> <p>India reported 141,986 new cases on Saturday, more than six times the number a week earlier. That official Covid-19 case count, like the government’s death tally—which stands at about 480,000—is a vast undercounting, many health experts say.</p> <p>The reproduction rate of the virus—the number of new infections caused by a single contagious person—recently hit 2.69, exceeding last year’s peak of 1.69, a government adviser said Wednesday. The official case count is expected surpass its daily record of 414,000, set in May, before the surge peaks in February.</p> <p>Officials in Delhi, Mumbai and other cities have responded with curfews and other restrictions, while saying they plan to add hospital beds, secure additional medicines and boost oxygen supplies.</p> <p>All three were in severely short supply last spring. People transported sick relatives to hospitals—ambulances were also scarce—only to be turned away at the door. Many died without treatment at home. Crematoriums operated 24 hours a day.</p> <p>But health experts say that many Indian states, which are largely responsible for Covid-19 response, are ill-prepared for another serious surge—even if Omicron cases turn out to be less severe than those caused by the Delta variant, as some early studies indicate.</p> <p>Months of declining infections and deaths have made many politicians and officials complacent, these experts say. They forgo masks and once again are holding huge political rallies. Covid-19 wards and temporary treatment centers have been dismantled or vastly slimmed down. Some planned oxygen plants never materialized.</p> <p>“On paper, we are better prepared. In the mind, also probably better prepared,” said K. Srinath Reddy, president of the Public Health Foundation of India, a think tank based in New Delhi. “But in terms of actual operational requirements, there is a variation among the states.”</p>

Mumbai, India's financial capital, had terminated the contracts of about 85% to 90% of its employees at nine Covid-19 field hospitals by November, leaving a "skeleton staff" that mostly handled vaccinations, said Suresh Kakani, a senior official in charge of the city's health department.

With almost no patients, Mumbai considered closing the hospitals, which have a combined capacity of 10,000, but decided in December to keep them open until at least March 2022, Mr. Kakani said. Now his team is busy ramping up; an outsourcing agency is handling some of the hiring.

Mr. Kakani defended the staff reduction as an effective utilization of existing resources. "Otherwise if somebody's sitting idle, doing nothing, it is difficult to manage the staff," he said.

This time around, Indian doctors are armed with crucial experience from the spring wave, health experts said. But like their counterparts around the world, many are exhausted after two years of the pandemic. Doctors in New Delhi held a strike last month to protest understaffing at government hospitals. The strike, which crippled medical services, was called off just a week ago.

Covid-19 patients may flood hospitals and clinics even if many aren't seriously ill, said Lalit Kant, an infectious-disease epidemiologist and former head of the Division of Epidemiology and Communicable Diseases at the Indian Council of Medical Research. "Now even the people who are mildly infected are seeking consultation," he said, telling of a friend who recently closed his clinic until infections drop because he was dealing with a large number of Covid-19 patients.

"He is an old man," Dr. Kant added. "He is scared himself."

Politicians have sent mixed messages. Many cities have implemented Covid restrictions, but Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other elected officials have continued to hold huge election rallies, sans masks, ahead of key elections in several states this year. Arvind Kejriwal, the chief minister of Delhi, tested positive for Covid-19 on Tuesday, a day after holding a rally where he gave a speech without a mask. Later that day, Delhi announced a weekend curfew.

Statistical modeling by the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation projects the current surge will peak in early February at more than nine million new cases a day—including infections not counted in the official tally—about matching its projection for last spring's wave.

Deaths and hospitalizations, though, are expected to be a fraction of what they were last spring. In Mumbai, people hospitalized for Covid-19 in this surge tend to be less seriously ill than in previous waves, Mr. Kakani said. Patients are being discharged after four or five days, compared with 14 days during the first wave in 2020 and 12 days during the wave last year. Early studies indicate Omicron may be less deadly than Delta, and some countries, including South Africa suffered a fast spread of the variant without a catastrophic uptick in deaths.

But health experts said that public officials counting on a less severe form of Covid-19 to mean a less severe strain on the healthcare system are making a dangerous bet, given India's enormous population of nearly 1.4 billion.

"If it infects millions and millions and millions of people again, there's still going to be a percentage that gets seriously ill," said Dr. Amir Ullah Khan, research director at the Centre for Development Policy and Practice, a think tank based in Hyderabad. "Especially if they're not vaccinated."

India missed its target of administering two shots of a Covid-19 vaccine to its entire adult population of about 940 million by the end of 2021. About two-thirds of adults and 45% of the total population are double dosed. Vaccine eligibility was expanded this month to 15-to-18-year-olds. Booster shots for front-line workers and people over 60 with comorbidities will begin on Jan. 10.

The government, said Dr. Khan, has failed to push its vaccination program as aggressively as some other countries, neither rewarding people who get their shots nor restricting those who don't.

	<p>Certainly many Indians feel no urgency to get the vaccine. On a recent weekday morning, a medical clinic in South Delhi waited two hours before cracking open a single bottle of Covishield, the local name for the vaccine developed by AstraZeneca PLC. Only five people showed up for a jab.</p> <p>“Not enough people have shown up for us to open a vial,” one staff member said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 Absence of Kazakhstan longtime leader?
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/mystery-surrounds-absence-of-kazakhstans-longtime-leader-as-protesters-challenge-state-he-built-11641639722?mod=hp_lead_pos5
GIST	<p>For decades, Kazakh strongman Nursultan Nazarbayev forcefully put down challenges to his rule. When he stepped down as president in 2019, he chose a close ally as his successor and continued to wield power behind the scenes, diplomats say. The capital city was renamed after him.</p> <p>But for days following the start of an increasingly bloody confrontation this week that has pitted the authorities in Kazakhstan, a former Soviet republic in Central Asia, against protesters demanding political change, his conspicuous absence from the political stage was a central mystery.</p> <p>Word of the longtime leader emerged Saturday, when his spokesman said the 81-year-old Mr. Nazarbayev was in the capital, Nur-Sultan, taking calls from allies and calling on Kazakhs to support his political heir, current President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.</p> <p>The younger leader has tried to crush the uprising, issuing shoot-on-sight orders to Kazakh troops and summoning military assistance from Russia. He has also moved to curtail Mr. Nazarbayev’s authority.</p> <p>On Wednesday, Mr. Tokayev removed Mr. Nazarbayev as chairman of the country’s security council, stripping him of his most important official position. Mr. Tokayev now holds the post himself.</p> <p>The president has also removed important allies of Mr. Nazarbayev from the government, including the head of the powerful domestic security agency, who had served as prime minister under Mr. Nazarbayev. He was detained on suspicion of treason and replaced by Mr. Tokayev’s own head of presidential security.</p> <p>On Wednesday, Mr. Tokayev dismissed the ministers in his cabinet, hand-selected by Mr. Nazarbayev, blaming them for the unrest.</p> <p>All of that has led to questions about whether there is an elite power struggle playing out amid the violence. Diplomats say separate camps aligned with each of the two men are competing in a country where proximity to power and family connections are routes to favors and jobs.</p> <p>“A political crisis around the transition of power has long been expected,” said Vasily Kashin, a specialist on former Soviet republics at Moscow’s Higher School of Economics. “Whether this is the cause or the consequence of the violence, Mr. Nazarbayev’s fortunes are unclear.”</p> <p>Some observers believe Mr. Tokayev is trying to distance himself from the increasingly unpopular Mr. Nazarbayev. As crowds gathered earlier this week, they angrily chanted “Shal, ket!” or “Go away, old man!” in reference to the former president.</p> <p>For decades, Mr. Nazarbayev personally shaped the country’s political system, centralizing power in the hands of a small and wealthy elite that has enjoyed the protection of the country’s well-trained security services, according to current and former diplomats.</p> <p>Mr. Nazarbayev’s eldest daughter, Dariga, was made speaker of Kazakhstan’s upper house of parliament, the second most powerful post in the country, where she served until 2020. His other daughter, Dinara, and her husband have created one of the largest business empires in the country.</p>

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Mr. Nazarbayev won friends in the West by giving up the nuclear weapons his country inherited from the Soviet Union. In the years that followed, he strengthened those ties by allowing U.S. oil majors in to tap into the country's oil reserves.

"In a lot of ways he got off to a good start and his authoritarian rule was lighter than some of the other countries," said William Courtney, a former U.S. ambassador to Kazakhstan and adjunct senior fellow at the Rand Corporation.

But, Mr. Courtney said: "As time went on, he made fewer and fewer reforms, and authoritarian rule became autocratic rule while income inequality became a more important issue for average Kazakhs."

Kazakh elections came and went, with Mr. Nazarbayev always winning more than 80% of the votes cast. Away from the ballot box, he put down challenges, even as dissent in the country grew.

In 2001, businessman and former energy, industry and trade minister Mukhtar Ablyazov helped found a political party that aimed to undo Mr. Nazarbayev's centralized political system. The next year, Mr. Ablyazov was convicted of abusing his powers while minister and sentenced to six years in prison.

International pressure forced Mr. Nazarbayev to free him in 2003 and Mr. Ablyazov ultimately moved to Europe. Kazakh authorities say he has continued to fund opposition politics in Kazakhstan.

Following a drop in oil prices in 2008, resentment over the wealth of Mr. Nazarbayev and his family grew, resulting in a series of protests, some of which were violently suppressed. In 2011, oil workers demanding better pay were shot at by security services and more than a dozen were killed.

Demonstrations erupted in 2014 over a drop in the value of the national currency, and in 2016, people took to the streets to oppose land-reform measures that they felt would favor Chinese investors.

After formally handing power to Mr. Tokayev in 2019, Mr. Nazarbayev continued to largely control Kazakhstan's political life, say Kazakh and foreign political observers, and he took on a series of titles giving him privileged status above the rest of the political class.

Under Mr. Tokayev, government policies stayed the same and living standards for many Kazakhs continued to fall.

Protests continued. Over time they took on a more political slant, with activists campaigning for a more liberal political system, with opposition parties allowed to compete in elections. Demonstrators took aim at the continuing role of Mr. Nazarbayev and the slow pace of change.

"Economic protests transformed into political ones," said Diana T. Kudaibergenova, a Cambridge University sociologist and expert on Kazakhstan. "People saw that just because the president has gone, it doesn't change the system."

These protests have likewise elicited a heavy hand from the government, though this time Mr. Nazarbayev isn't at the forefront of that response.

"Tokayev firmly has this situation in control," said Rakhim Oshakbaev, director of TALAP, a think tank in Nur-Sultan.

Mr. Kashin of Moscow's Higher School of Economics said the Russian presence showed Russia's willingness to back Mr. Tokayev.

"Tokayev is a good leader and since the interest is keeping the system safe and stable, it was clear from the beginning that Moscow would back the current leader," said Mr. Kashin.

HEADLINE	01/08 New studies: omicron mild, spreads fast
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-omicron-studies-help-explain-why-the-variant-is-mild-but-spreads-fast-11641637803?mod=hp_lead_pos1
GIST	<p>The threat posed by the Omicron variant has now come into sharper focus, with recent clinical data and laboratory studies lending support to early reports suggesting that it is milder but more transmissible than other variants of the new coronavirus.</p> <p>“It spreads very, very fast, but it doesn’t appear to have the virulence or machismo to really pack as much of a wallop as the Alpha or Delta variants,” James Musser, chairman of Houston Methodist Hospital’s pathology and genomic medicine department and the leader of a new study of Omicron infections, said of the variant.</p> <p>Recent laboratory studies suggest that Omicron’s lower virulence may reflect its apparent tendency to thrive in cells in the upper respiratory tract rather than in the lungs, where Covid-19 infections can cause potentially fatal breathing problems.</p> <p>Experiments on human respiratory tissues conducted recently at the University of Cambridge and the University of Hong Kong showed that Omicron prefers to infect cells in the bronchi, the tubes that connect the windpipe to the lungs, while the Delta variant better infects and replicates in lung tissue.</p> <p>“Lower-airway replication is a pathway or a reason for severe disease, and we may have a situation where a virus is taking us towards a less severe disease outcome,” said Ravindra Gupta, a University of Cambridge virologist who was involved in the research.</p> <p>Similar results were reported by scientists studying Omicron in mice and hamsters, who found that the variant tended to infect the animals’ nasal passages while other variants attacked the lungs. The scientists, who posted their research online Dec. 29 in advance of peer review, also found that animals infected with Omicron developed less severe illness than animals infected with earlier variants.</p> <p>“That suggests that the virus has some inherent difficulty in the animal models going from the upper airway to the lower airway,” said Michael Diamond, a viral immunologist at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis and one of the scientists who conducted the research. “Now, whether it’s the same reason that’s happening in humans or not, we don’t know.”</p> <p>Dr. Diamond said Omicron was unique among multiple coronavirus variants tested so far in its tendency to affect hamsters’ upper airways but not their lungs.</p> <p>The findings align with clinical results reported from South Africa, where Omicron was first identified in November. “We’re just not seeing patients admitted with Covid pneumonia and lung complications” that often accompany the most severe cases, said Waasila Jassat, a public health specialist at the National Institute for Communicable Diseases in Johannesburg.</p> <p>But there are limits to how much we can infer about human disease from experiments on tissue cultures and lab animals, said Vineet Menachery, a virologist at the University of Texas Medical Branch. What’s more, he said, “hamster models and mouse models are not great for assays examining the upper airway” because their lungs more closely resemble humans’ than their upper airways.</p> <p>Specific mutations in Omicron’s spike protein, the structure the virus uses to attach to and enter cells, may help explain why the variant spreads so easily. “If it’s better at infecting cells, then the expectation is that it’s better at transmission,” Dr. Menachery said.</p> <p>Omicron’s spike shares mutations spotted in earlier variants that are known to bind virus particles more tightly to cells, a process that Dr. Menachery likened to a key fitting a lock. Omicron also has two mutations, H655Y and P681H, that are known to boost the virus’s ability to enter cells, Dr. Menachery said.</p>

Despite these recent findings, scientists have yet to answer many questions about Omicron, which has now caused outbreaks in more than 100 countries.

For example, it isn't yet clear how the course of symptomatic Omicron infections differs in unvaccinated people and those who have some immunity from vaccination or prior infection, though early reports suggest that the infections are milder in people with prior immunity.

Similarly, researchers said it's too soon in the current surge to conclude that Omicron is less lethal than other variants—though scientists said the comparatively low hospitalization rates and reduced need for breathing support associated with the variant mean that is likely the case.

"It would be hard to imagine that the death rates won't also be lower," said Robert Wachter, chairman of the department of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco.

Then there is the matter of to what extent immunity resulting from vaccination or prior infection explains why Omicron infections seem to cause less severe illness. "It's hard to tease that apart," said Dr. Menachery. "Is it less severe because you're dealing with a population that has more immunity? Or is it less severe because the virus itself is less severe?"

People infected with Omicron are less likely to need hospitalization or intensive care than those who have the Delta variant, according to recent studies of clinical data by Dr. Musser and other researchers.

"A case of Omicron compared to a case of Delta in a comparable person, comparable vaccination status, comparable age and risk factors is on the order of 60% or 70% less severe," Dr. Wachter said.

But public health officials have expressed concern that the sheer volume of Omicron cases—including first-time infections as well as breakthrough infections among vaccinated people—could overwhelm U.S. hospitals. On Jan. 6, the U.S. had a seven-day average of 602,547 daily reported infections, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis of Johns Hopkins University data.

As they learn more about Omicron, doctors and public health officials continue to urge Americans to get vaccinated and boosted and to continue with masking and social distancing.

"At least during the surge you're likely to see hospitalizations go up in absolute numbers, which is why it's a public health concern, and requires all of us at least for the next six to eight weeks to take all the measures we can," said Nahid Bhadelia, an infectious diseases physician and director of the Center for Emerging Infectious Diseases Policy and Research at Boston University.

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HEADLINE	01/07 December job report: disappointing growth
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/jan/07/us-jobs-report-december-latest-edited-
GIST	<p>The US economy ended the year with disappointing jobs growth figures for December, adding just 199,000 workers to the non-farming labor force.</p> <p>Economists had been expecting more than double that number – 422,000 – suggesting that the US economy was improving, but erratically, as worker shortages troubled employers even before the Omicron coronavirus variant arrived, threatening another recovery stall.</p> <p>Figures released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics showed that the US unemployment rate fell to 3.9%, and that job creation was highest in leisure and hospitality, a key recovery sector, which added 53,000. Professional and business services contributed 43,000 while manufacturing added 26,000.</p> <p>"The muted 199,000 gain in non-farm payrolls and the more muted increase in labor force participation suggest that worker shortages were becoming a bigger restraint on employment growth, even before the</p>

Omicron surge in infections, which could knock hundreds of thousands off payrolls in January,” noted Michael Pearce, senior US economist at Capital Economics.

But the slower-than-anticipated pace of hiring is offset by the record number of positions in 2021 and jobless claims registered at 207,000 last week close to the lowest level in 50 years.

But the latest numbers suggested continued uncertainty over the course of a US economy that had begun rebounding strongly between waves of Covid disruption.

The latest Omicron surge, which has disrupted transportation, office reopenings and hospitality, has shown that expectations of a smooth recovery are misplaced.

“The volatility incurred by Omicron sweeping across America means that the data point of today is basically useless in assessing tomorrow,” said George Ball, chairman of financial services firm Sanders Morris Harris, told NBC TV on Friday morning.

The disappointing job figures may also cause US central bankers to reconsider plans to accelerate reductions in stimulus spending as they attempt to balance job growth against tackling inflation that stands close to a 40-year high.

Fed officials predict three rate rises this year, with a further five by the end of 2024 as it moves toward its goal of bringing inflation to a 2% target and achieving maximum employment.

But the Fed chairman, Jay Powell, has also said that the central bank is watching wage growth closely for further evidence that the economy could turn into a repeating self-reinforcing battle between rising costs and wage gains.

Average pay rose 0.4% in December, indicating that wages rose around 4.8% in 2021. But that’s still beneath the rate of inflation, most recently pegged at 6.8%.

Still, weekly jobless claims are around 200,000 – or at a level below the 2019 weekly average from before the pandemic – but the labor force overall remains about 2.4 million workers below pre-pandemic levels, reflecting ongoing disruptions related to the virus.

Friday’s figures reflect how tricky it is to forecast an economy that’s still being roiled by a pandemic. ADP Research Institute data released on Wednesday showed that US companies added the most jobs in seven months using data that is less comprehensive than the analysis put out by the labor department on Friday.

Economists had predicted half the number of job gains, with the ADP chief economist, Nela Richardson, saying the hiring was “broad-based”. Higher wages and more attractive working terms may have been behind the surge, but many economists warn that the fast-spreading Omicron variant could affect hiring.

Capital Economics’ Pearce warned that employees off work would still be paid, and therefore counted as employed, and not show up in employment figures in the latest figures.

“The rapid spread of Omicron doesn’t appear to have delivered a big hit to services demand yet, but we expect widespread absenteeism could supersize the economy’s worker shortage this month,” Pearce said.

“The key takeaway for the Fed is that, with few signs of a recovery in labour supply, the continued decline in the unemployment rate and surge in wage growth looks set to be sustained over 2022,” he added.

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HEADLINE	01/07 True number Covid deaths undercounted?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/07/true-number-covid-deaths-us-likely-undercounted-experts

GIST

The true number of deaths from the Covid pandemic in the US is probably being undercounted, due to the long-lasting and little-understood effects of Covid infection and other deadly complications that surged during the past two years.

“We are seeing right now the highest death rates we have ever seen in the history of this business,” J Scott Davison, CEO of insurance company OneAmerica, told journalists on 30 December.

“Death rates are up 40% over what they were pre-pandemic,” he said, among working-age people between 18 and 64. Deaths among older Americans have also increased, with one in 100 Americans over the age of 65 dying.

There have been an estimated 942,431 excess deaths in the US since February 2020, [according](#) to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Hispanic, Black and Native American and Alaska Native populations have been disproportionately affected with high death rates, [research](#) shows.

Previous crises pale in comparison to the pandemic, Davison said. “A one-in-200-year catastrophe would be a 10% increase over pre-pandemic [levels]. So 40% is just unheard of.”

Many of the deaths aren’t counted in the official Covid tally, he said, because they happen months after Covid infections. “The deaths that are being reported as Covid deaths greatly understate the actual death losses among working-age people from the pandemic. It may not all be Covid on their death certificates, but deaths are up in just huge, huge numbers.”

In addition to deaths from Covid-19, drug overdoses – already one of the leading causes of death for working-age adults – and homicides have also [risen](#) during the pandemic.

Insurers are also seeing a rise in disability claims – at first for short-term disability and now for long-term disability, because of both long Covid and delayed care for other illnesses, “because people haven’t been able to get the healthcare that they need because the hospitals are overrun”, Davison said. It’s a trend “consistent across every player in the business” of insurance.

Deaths from long Covid have been particularly difficult to track, because the virus may no longer be present at the time of death, but it weakened organs or created fatal new ailments.

“We’re seeing the statistics get written as we go, almost,” Micah Pollak, associate professor of economics at Indiana University Northwest, said. And high rates of mortality and disability will only continue as more people get infected, he said.

“We really don’t know what the tail of this thing looks like,” Pollak said of long Covid. “The further you get out [from infection], the longer time you have to potentially develop some kind of complications.” The high rates of death have not surprised him, Pollak said, given the equally high rates of cases and the unknown effects of a novel virus.

“There’s just so much evidence of these long-term effects of Covid that I naturally assumed people realized that, hey, we’re gonna see probably a lot of deaths down the road – not necessarily soon after infection, but indirectly as a result of infection, as well as not just deaths but disability.”

He expects these losses to continue as the pandemic surges and hospitals pass their breaking points.

“People say that we’re on the verge of the healthcare system collapsing and things like that, and I think we’re probably past that point,” Pollak said. “We don’t really know what’s going to happen in the next month or so as all these Omicron cases hit the healthcare system.”

The crush of the latest surge is adding to two years of overload and burnout, which could have serious long-term implications for healthcare.

“We’re going to come out of this with a healthcare system just incredibly diminished because of what it’s gone through,” Pollak said. “We have some very serious long-term consequences for our healthcare system that, if we don’t address them, you’re going to see more sickness, more preventable illnesses, whether it’s Covid or otherwise, showing up in the population that we just can’t deal with.”

The economic fallout from the pandemic will probably be felt for years to come, with continued workforce shortages that are already being felt.

“This worker shortage that we’re experiencing is not going to go away,” Pollak said.

In addition to the large numbers of people dying, many are becoming disabled – making it difficult for them and their caregivers to work other jobs.

“In the US especially, we just don’t have very good childcare benefits, elder care benefits, family care benefits,” Pollak said. “And as long as we don’t have those things, people are going to be making the choice to exit the workforce, if they can, to provide those services.”

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HEADLINE	01/07 Rapid at-home Covid tests price gouging
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/07/covid-rapid-test-price-gouging-omicron
GIST	<p>With at-home Covid tests running scarce during the Omicron surge, the price gouging has begun, and everyone from restaurants to pet food stores appear to be trying to cash in.</p> <p>Recent reporting by Vice found a Manhattan deli advertised an Abbott BinaxNOW rapid test (retail: \$24) on the Seamless delivery app for \$80. Meanwhile, an online-only pet store, Pet Foods by Village Farm, offered to deliver the same type of test for \$50, and a liquor store was selling a “Covid fighter pack”, including rapid tests and hand sanitizer, for more than \$100.</p> <p>There have been reports across the country of vendors charging double or triple the normal costs of at-home Covid tests. One New York restaurant worker paid \$180 for four test kits, the Los Angeles Times reported. And a Covid testing site in San Francisco’s Mission district is reportedly charging between \$99 and \$250 for rapid tests.</p> <p>Authorities have warned that this is a growing problem. In a December statement, the New York attorney general, Letitia James, encouraged people to report price hikes. “Fraudsters are on notice that if they attempt to price gouge during this new surge, we will not hesitate to take action,” she said, adding that her office had already seen reports of test kits “being unlawfully sold for more than \$40 and up to \$70 per package”.</p> <p>A pack of two at-home rapid Covid tests should cost around \$25. This week, Walmart and Kroger are raising prices for BinaxNOW rapid tests to the market price after a temporary government-mandated \$14.</p> <p>The Biden administration has tried to alleviate the situation by announcing plans to purchase and distribute 500m free rapid tests, and said on Friday that at-home tests will be reimbursed by insurers starting next week.</p> <p>But, with pharmacy shelves picked clean and lines at testing sites stretching for hours, people may be more willing to pay a premium to get tested.</p> <p>The situation is reminiscent of the early days of the pandemic, when the onset of Covid unleashed a wave of price gouging for personal protective equipment, such as \$70 hand sanitizer and N95 masks.</p> <p>But how much of this is legal? According to the United States Public Interest Group, a non-profit focusing on consumer issues, “Businesses are allowed to increase prices for critical supplies during an emergency, but they are not allowed to raise the price of products excessively to take advantage of the current</p>

pandemic.” The laws vary from state to state, but raising prices by more than 20% could be considered price gouging, the group said.

In California, that number is lower. Markups of 10% may be considered price gouging. Violators are subject to fines up to \$10,000 and up to one year in jail.

“You should not be increasing prices during a state of emergency, as people need critical supplies to keep people safe,” said Jenn Engstrom, state director for California Public Interest Research Group, an advocacy organization. Engstrom suggests that those who see suspected price gouging file a complaint to their state’s attorney general – most have a phone number to call or online submission form.

California expanded its definition of price gouging in 2020 to protect against the tactics seen early on in the pandemic, such as hoarding hand sanitizer and gloves to resell on Amazon. The new legislation closed a loophole in state law that prevented prosecuting new vendors, which includes these online resellers.

“No one should be ripped off, especially on critical supplies during a pandemic,” Engstrom said, “and price gouging of Covid-19 tests is totally profiteering and shouldn’t be tolerated.”

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HEADLINE	01/07 Citigroup enforces ‘no jab, no job’ policy
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/jan/07/citigroup-terminate-unvaccinated-workers-no-jab-no-job
GIST	<p>Citigroup is set to begin enforcing its “no jab, no job” policy next week, making it the first Wall Street bank to implement a vaccine mandate.</p> <p>The New York-headquartered bank said in October that it would require all US employees to be vaccinated against Covid as a condition of their employment in line with a Biden administration policy requiring workers supporting government contracts to be fully vaccinated.</p> <p>The Biden policy has been widely challenged in the courts, and is currently before the US supreme court following requests by Republican state officials and business groups to block it.</p> <p>Citigroup also said it would examine requests for exemptions on religious or medical grounds, or any other accommodation by state or local law, on a case-by-case basis.</p> <p>More than 90% of Citigroup staff have so far complied with the mandate and that figure is rising rapidly, Bloomberg reported, citing a Citigroup spokeswoman. Citigroup, the news agency said, will place workers who do not comply on unpaid leave, with their last day of employment at the end of the month.</p> <p>The enforcement of “no jab, no job” on 14 January comes as Covid infections have surged in New York to five times last winter’s numbers – 59% thought to be of the highly transmissible Omicron variant. The decision to enforce the mandate comes as Wall Street banks have struggled to get employees back to their office desks after close to two years of remote working.</p> <p>Last month, JPMorgan, the largest US bank, told unvaccinated staff based in Manhattan to work remotely “until alternative solutions are considered” and said it was increasing restrictions on unvaccinated workers.</p> <p>In a memo sent to staff, first reported by Reuters, JPMorgan also urged bankers to get Covid vaccines and to receive booster shots, while relaxing mask policy to require they are worn requiring in lobby areas, elevators and in cafes when not eating.</p> <p>The memo, issued during a relative lull between the Delta variant and Omicron surge, said “it seems unfair” for vaccinated workers to wear face coverings indoors, adding that doing so would slow down its efforts for a return to normalcy.</p>

	<p>Citigroup's move comes as New York's leadership announced a policy designed to hasten workers' return to their desks in office buildings that are estimated to be just 30% full.</p> <p>On Thursday, New York City's mayor, Eric Adams, standing beside the state governor, Kathy Hochul, proposed easing workers back into businesses with a three-day working week and then expanding to five days in New York City.</p> <p>"I say let's start out with a three-day week, to let people see how safe it is to come back to work, then we cycle back into a five-day week," he said. "We can do this within a three-week period and be up and operating in our city."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/07 Return to remote schooling brings despair
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/07/us-schools-return-remote-learning-despair-alarm-omicron-covid
GIST	<p>Latonya Peterson sums up her frustration as a parent over Detroit schools returning – at least temporarily – to virtual learning in three short words: "I hate it."</p> <p>Facing a surge in Covid-19 cases, the Detroit district this week joined a growing number of others in moving classes online after the winter break.</p> <p>The shift involving 50,000 students once again leaves parents juggling home and work schedules around the educational needs of their children.</p> <p>A single parent who works more than 60 hours each week at two jobs, Peterson sometimes had to miss work to help her teenage son during more than a year of online learning.</p> <p>"I will have to take time off, but I'm looking at how long this is going to last. You only get so many off days and so many paid time-off days," Peterson said on Wednesday, a day after the district announced that students would resume classes at home with laptops through at least 14 January.</p> <p>The vast majority of US districts appear to be returning to in-person learning, but other large school systems including those in Newark, New Jersey, Milwaukee and Cleveland have gone back to remote learning as infections soar and sideline staff members. Dozens of smaller districts have followed, including many around Detroit, Chicago and Washington.</p> <p>The disruptions also raise alarms about risks to students. Long stretches of remote learning over the last two years have taken a toll, leaving many kids with academic and mental health setbacks that experts are still trying to understand.</p> <p>Joe Biden, who campaigned on a promise to reopen classrooms, is pressing schools to remain open. With vaccines and regular virus testing, his administration has said there's no reason to keep schools closed.</p> <p>"We have no reason to think at this point that Omicron is worse for children than previous variants," Biden told reporters earlier this week. "We know that our kids can be safe when in school."</p> <p>But the reality for some districts is not so simple: Testing supplies have been scarce, and many districts face low vaccine uptake in their communities. In Detroit, just 44% of residents five and older have received a vaccine dose, compared with a statewide rate of 63%.</p> <p>In a letter to parents, Detroit superintendent Nikolai Vitti said: "The only way we're going to get to the other side of this pandemic is if we move to higher rates of vaccination."</p> <p>The closures are often driven by waves of teachers calling in sick. More than a third of Philadelphia's 216 public schools have switched to remote learning through at least Friday.</p>

	<p>Chicago students remained out of school for a third straight day on Friday, after school leaders failed to reach an agreement with the teachers union over virus safety protocols. The union wants to revert to remote instruction because of the infection surge.</p> <p>In Detroit, both Peterson and her son, Joshua Jackson, 16, are vaccinated. Joshua would rather stay in-person and said it was more difficult for him to focus in a virtual classroom.</p> <p>“I feel like I learned less,” the high school junior said. “I’m worried that we won’t go back to class. They (the district) did it before and said it only would be a short while. It turned out to be the whole school year.”</p> <p>Officials in districts that are returning to online instruction insist the move is only temporary, with most intending to go back to in-person classes within a week or two. As infections reach record levels in some areas, some parents say it’s the right move.</p> <p>The Omicron-driven surge has likely not topped out yet in the US, said Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Friday.</p> <p>“I don’t believe we’ve seen the peak yet here in the United States,” she told NBC’s Today show.</p> <p>The US reported 662,000 new cases on Thursday, the fourth highest daily figure in the pandemic.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 UK military: Russia threat undersea cables
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jan/08/uk-military-chief-warns-of-russian-threat-to-vital-undersea-cables
GIST	<p>The head of the UK’s armed forces has warned that Russian submarine activity is threatening underwater cables that are crucial to communication systems around the world.</p> <p>Adm Tony Radakin said undersea cables that transmit internet data are “the world’s real information system”, and added that any attempt to damage them could be considered an “act of war”.</p> <p>Speaking to the Times in his first interview since assuming the role, Sir Tony – a former head of the Royal Navy – said there had been a “phenomenal increase in Russian submarine and underwater activity” over the past 20 years.</p> <p>He said that meant Moscow could “put at risk and potentially exploit the world’s real information system, which is undersea cables that go all around the world”.</p> <p>“That is where predominantly all the world’s information and traffic travels. Russia has grown the capability to put at threat those undersea cables and potentially exploit those undersea cables.”</p> <p>The navy has been tracking Russian submarine activity, with a collision between the HMS Northumberland and a Russian sub sparking speculation about cable-mapping activity.</p> <p>The collision in December 2020 was filmed by a documentary crew from Channel 5 who were working on a television series called Warship: Life At Sea.</p> <p>In his interview, Radakin also said the UK needed to develop hypersonic missiles to keep up with the military competition.</p> <p>He highlighted Russia’s hypersonic and long-range missile capability as a threat and Britain’s comparative capabilities as a weakness. “We haven’t [got them] and we must have,” he said.</p>

	<p>Radakin said he had briefed ministers on Britain's "military choices" if Russia launched an invasion of Ukraine, but did not reveal any further information.</p> <p>The defence secretary, Ben Wallace, has previously said it would be "highly unlikely" the UK would send troops if an invasion occurred, while the Times reports cyber-attacks "could be an option".</p> <p>Talks between Moscow, the US and Nato are scheduled for next week amid tensions sparked by a Russian military build-up on the Ukraine border, but the Nato general secretary Jens Stoltenberg has said the alliance needs to prepare "for the possibility that diplomacy will fail".</p> <p>The foreign secretary, Liz Truss, on Friday called for Russia to end its "malign activity" towards Ukraine.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/07 Teachers push back on school reopenings
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/jan/08/us-teachers-schools-omicron-staff-shortages-working-conditions-testing
GIST	<p>Many teachers across the US are resisting immediate school reopenings and asking for improved safety measures this month as a record number of Covid-19 cases have been recorded as a result of the spread of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>A few school districts have opted to restart school after the winter break remotely for the first week or two, while most others are grappling with tightening or reinstituting Covid-19 safety protocols.</p> <p>Several teachers who spoke to the Guardian expressed concerns over severe staffing shortages, a lack of adequate and promised personal protective equipment, difficulties in accessing Covid testing and worsening overall working conditions.</p> <p>Rori Abernethy, a teacher in San Francisco, California, said teachers are being faced with severe staffing shortages that are forcing teachers to serve as substitutes during preparation time and are increasing their classroom sizes due to teachers and other staff retiring, resigning, or calling out sick.</p> <p>"This is the hardest teaching year I've had in 20 years," said Abernethy. "Morale is low amongst teachers and it feels like the whole city is fighting over politics and no one cares about what teachers are going through in the classroom. If we do complain, people are cruel and tell us to quit or that we don't care about kids."</p> <p>She also noted staff and students haven't received enough personal protective equipment such as proper masks, that Covid testing is difficult for teachers given stringent drop-off times and is not mandated or easily available for students, and that Covid sick leave for teachers expired at the end of 2021. According to Abernethy, four teachers at her school quit before winter break, and 25 staff were absent on the first day of school after the break, on 3 January, though student attendance was normal.</p> <p>There were 575,000 fewer local and state education employees in October 2021 than in February 2020. Before the pandemic, teacher shortages were widespread and growing throughout the US, while many public school buildings were crumbling, in dire need of repairs, proper upkeep or replacement.</p> <p>Retha Roblero, an elementary school teacher in Columbus, Ohio, participated in a safety strike on 3 January with other teachers who were working in their school building while students were remote, as part of the building had no working heat. Less than an hour after the strike began, teachers were permitted by the district to work remotely.</p> <p>"There's no good answer," said Roblero, about the choice between in-person or remote learning in response to Covid surges. "I want to be in person teaching every day. But I also don't want to carry something or somebody else to carry something."</p>

Alison Ross, a teacher for about 20 years based in the Atlanta, Georgia, area, resigned from her school district position in fall 2020 over a disregard for Covid protections as she is immunocompromised. She has been tutoring and teaching remotely part-time, while relying on savings, and is dismayed at the prospect of returning to a full-time position as the pandemic continues to spread in the US.

“I feel like my livelihood was stolen from me,” said Ross. “We could afford N95 masks for everybody, we could afford good ventilation, we can afford paying teachers more and having smaller classes. These are all choices that as a society, our government has made. People just think that’s just how it has to be and that’s not how it has to be.”

A teacher in Crested Butte, Colorado, who requested to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation described a lack of testing options for staff and students, with long wait lines at testing sites and no at-home tests available. The teacher says staff have been reporting to work after testing positive and there’s a lack of transparency in contact tracing compared with previous periods during the pandemic.

“We have been told that they simply do not have the staff or time to deal with it, so contact tracing is out the window,” the teacher said. “The morale is quite low because staff feel uncared for. I know several teachers with the mindset that we will all get it eventually so let’s just get it over with. As teachers, we’re the ones that take on the brunt of it to protect the kids.”

Staffing shortages in their school district have also extended to a lack of school bus drivers, substitute teachers, cafeteria workers and a decline in student attendance. They already used up their Covid sick leave earlier this school year when they tested positive after their son caught it, despite being fully vaccinated.

“To the general public and administration, it just feels that staff and student health doesn’t matter. We should have tested to return. No one wants to wear masks or go to school virtually, however now we may be forced to do so without a plan in place,” the teacher added. “I have been searching for jobs that are safer and value my family’s health and safety more. We feel so undervalued.”

In [New York City](#), teachers held a protest during the first school week in January over school reopenings and a lack of Covid safety measures for students and staff.

“We’re concerned about not having a negative Covid result as a requirement for returning like other school districts and private schools had,” said Ronnie Almonte, a teacher at Bard High School Early College in Manhattan, who noted Bard College requires a negative test to return to the campus this spring. He also expressed concerns with the new Covid isolation guidelines, which decreased isolation days from 10 to five days.

Teachers in Chicago [voted](#) to return to remote learning over lack of Covid safety measures, though Chicago public schools [cancelled school and locked out](#) teachers from electronic accounts in retaliation.

Sarah Caswell, a science teacher in Philadelphia, argued the push to continue in-person school during a pandemic hasn’t accounted for the problems facing public education systems before the pandemic began, from [overcrowding](#) to [excessive standardized testing](#) and socio-economic disparities, with Covid further exposing those problems.

“Morale is the absolute lowest that I’ve ever seen it,” said Caswell. “This goes from the top all the way down through the building administration. They expect that we’re going to treat families and students with grace and understand that everybody’s living through these crazy times and be supportive and encouraging, which is absolutely what we have to do and should be doing right now. But they don’t show the same grace with us.”

In Philadelphia, [81 schools switched](#) to remote learning with less than 24 hours notice, and Caswell noted that numerous staff at her school tested positive during the first day of school.

	<p>“It’s this constant anxiety and stress,” added Caswell. “It’s just a lot of pressure from a lot of different directions and not a whole lot of compassion and grace. My belief is the academics will work their way out. Kids are resilient when you provide them with the right support, and instead we’re saying that we’re going to go back to what we’ve always done. That didn’t work before the pandemic, so why does it work now?”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/07 King Co. prosecutor won’t seek re-election
SOURCE	https://www.seattlepi.com/news/article/King-County-Prosecutor-Dan-Satterberg-announces-16757986.php
GIST	<p>SEATTLE (AP) — King County Prosecutor Dan Satterberg announced Friday that after four terms in office, he won’t seek re-election this year.</p> <p>Satterberg has spent his entire career in the office, having joined it as an intern in 1984 and taking a full-time job the next year. Then-Prosecutor Norm Maleng made him chief of staff at age 30, and he worked closely with Maleng until his sudden death in 2007, when Satterberg became prosecutor.</p> <p>In a statement Friday he said he wants to focus this year on addressing challenges posed by the pandemic, which include a backlog of some 6,000 felony cases. He also said that being home with his wife, an attorney at Microsoft, during COVID helped him realize that’s where he wants to be.</p> <p>“Serving in this office has been an extraordinary privilege for me, and being the elected PA is the best job that I could ever have, but it’s not the only thing that I ever want to do with my life,” Satterberg said.</p> <p>Satterberg, a Republican until 2018, when President Donald Trump’s tenure helped inspire him to leave the party and become a Democrat, was known for taking progressive steps as a prosecutor.</p> <p>In the days before cannabis legalization in Washington, he made clear he wasn’t interested in prosecuting sick medical marijuana patients. He worked to help establish a diversion program that has kept low-level narcotics and prostitution cases out of court, and he sought to re-sentence people who faced life in prison under the state’s three-strikes law.</p> <p>Satterberg also backed a diversion program that became the nonprofit Choose 180, aimed at keeping young people out of the criminal justice system.</p> <p>Satterberg’s chief of staff, Leesa Manion, quickly announced a campaign to replace him. She would be the first woman and first person of color to head the office, which has more than 575 employees.</p> <p>There have been only four elected prosecutors since 1949: Chuck Carroll, who served from 1949–1971; Chris Bayley, 1971-79; Maleng, 1979-2007; and Satterberg.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/07 Court rejects redistricting lawsuits
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/washington-supreme-court-rejects-redistricting-lawsuits/
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. (AP) — The Washington Supreme Court on Thursday declined to hear two lawsuits challenging new political maps drawn by the bipartisan redistricting commission.</p> <p>The separate lawsuits were filed by the Washington Coalition for Open Government and Arthur West of Olympia. They said the legislative and congressional maps must be invalidated because commissioners violated open meeting laws, negotiated secretly for hours before the Nov. 15 deadline and hurriedly voted on new boundaries that were not publicly displayed or debated.</p> <p>The justices unanimously rejected consolidating and accepting the two cases. The decision means the separate legal challenges would have to go through lower trial courts.</p>

Last month the state Supreme Court had said the plan adopted by the Washington Redistricting Commission “substantially complied” with statutory deadlines, and declined to adopt a new redistricting plan for the state.

The justices returned the issue to the commission for any final steps necessary before sending new political maps to the Legislature.

If lawmakers want to make any changes, they must do so within the first 30 days of the legislative session, which starts Monday, and any change must be approved by a two-thirds vote in each chamber.

The Redistricting Commission consisted of four voting members — two Democrats and two Republicans — appointed by legislative caucus leaders.

By law, at least three of the four had to agree on new political maps by Nov. 15. After going into a scheduled public meeting via Zoom at 7 p.m. the night of the deadline, the commissioners went into closed-door caucuses, which drew criticism. They then voted hastily just before midnight without showing the maps they just voted on.

Commissioners defended their chaotic final hours of work, saying they were hampered by a late 2020 Census, limitations caused by the coronavirus pandemic and technological issues such as crashing computers.

The redrawn maps for the 10 U.S. House districts and 49 state legislative districts will be in place for the next decade, starting with the midterm elections.

Washington didn’t gain a new U.S. House seat following the latest census. Washington has seven Democratic U.S. House members and three Republicans. The state Legislature is controlled by Democrats.

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HEADLINE	01/07 Gov. rescinds ban on affirmative-action
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/gov-inslee-to-rescind-20-year-old-directive-banning-affirmative-action-in-washington-state-government/
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA — Gov. Jay Inslee announced Friday a new executive order to boost diversity in Washington’s government, and said he will roll back a long-standing directive that restricts affirmative action in state hiring, contracting and education.</p> <p>The announcement, made after Inslee met Friday with Black community leaders, comes as he and state officials try to diversify government after voters in 2019 upheld a 20-year-old ban on affirmative action.</p> <p>The move immediately drew applause from organizations that have pushed for greater representation and changes to address systemic racism.</p> <p>But the move — which was slammed by affirmative action opponents who have won two statewide votes — could reignite a fierce and charged debate over the role of government in such matters.</p> <p>Washington’s struggles over affirmative action have simmered for more than two decades. In 1998, state voters decisively supported a grassroots effort led by Tim Eyman to end affirmative action based on race or gender with Initiative 200. The results came even as voters that year supported progressive ballot measures legalizing medical marijuana and hiking the minimum wage.</p> <p>In light of that vote, then-Gov. Gary Locke issued an executive directive instructing state agencies to not use affirmative action.</p> <p>But a 2017 opinion by Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson stated that the ban “does not prohibit all race- and sex-conscious measures.”</p>

In a statement Friday, the governor's office said Inslee will rescind Locke's [Directive 98-01](#), calling it "overly restrictive."

"Within the next 10 days, the governor will issue a replacement executive order that will instruct agencies on how to move forward with achieving equity while still complying" with the ban, according to the statement.

In prepared remarks, Inslee called diversity "our greatest strength, and it is only by leveling the playing field that it becomes possible for all Washingtonians to thrive and live healthy and successful lives.

"Today's announcements are systemic changes that are designed to break down barriers that have kept too many Washingtonians on the sidelines for too long," he added.

Meanwhile, [the executive order signed Friday](#) is aimed at increasing the number of certified women-, minority- and veteran-owned businesses in the state's master contracts.

As part of that, the state Department of Enterprise Services — which oversees some state contracts — and the Department of Transportation will review whether current requirements for bonding, insurance and experience are creating unnecessary obstacles to businesses' efforts to get state contracts.

Karen Johnson, director of the state Office of Equity, praised the announcement.

"Gov. Inslee said that he believes that Washington is an anti-racist state and will take action to hold our state government to that commitment," Johnson said in prepared remarks. "We are grateful for this bold action and look forward to working in solidarity with others to embed equity and justice into every state contacting action."

In 2018, Jesse Wineberry, a former state representative, [helped lead the push for a new initiative](#) to roll back the ban on affirmative action. That initiative to the Legislature qualified in 2019, and lawmakers that spring voted to lift the ban.

But opponents — led by a group of Chinese immigrants and supported by conservatives — gathered signatures to put the question to voters in a referendum. That fall, voters [upheld the ban by a slim margin](#).

[Opponents of affirmative action that year](#) contended that such measures are polarizing and ultimately reward people based on their race, ethnicity or gender, rather than merit.

Linda Yang, a spokesperson for that anti-Referendum 88 campaign, said Friday voters have been clear in their rejection of affirmative action policies in passing I-200 and rejecting R-88.

"I think he [Inslee] should respect voters' will. If they want to change the law, maybe do another initiative. I am pretty sure we could beat them again," Yang said.

Inslee's announcement drew criticism from John Carlson, the conservative radio talk-show host who helped lead the I-200 campaign in 1998.

"A governor cannot strike down a state law passed by the Legislature and passed into law by a previous governor or passed by the people, with an executive order," Carlson said. "If he wants to take a run at Initiative 200 and replace color blind equality with a system of different rules for different races, let's have it out.

"I can't think of a better place to do it than in the November midterms," Carlson said.

Carlson contrasted Inslee's actions with those of Locke, who as governor strongly opposed I-200 but still signed the directive that aligned state policies with measure after it was approved by 58% of voters.

While Inslee's statement said his order for state agencies seeks equity while still complying with the affirmative action ban, Carlson said "no one believes him."

Locke on Friday praised Inslee's decision to rescind his old executive order as appropriate, given the updated guidance from the attorney general's office, which is different than the more restrictive advice he received in 1998.

"Now that the attorney general's office has modified its opinion, it is absolutely appropriate and long overdue to modify or repeal that executive order," Locke said.

Inslee's discussion with Black leaders in King County June touched on police accountability and criminal justice reform, Black-centered patient care and building Black wealth, Inslee spokesperson Tara Lee wrote in an email.

"During that conversation there was an interest in discussing issues of disparities in contracting and 98-01 in addition to other issues raised," she wrote.

Advocates and elected officials had urged Inslee to rescind the directive. The [Metropolitan King County Council](#), [Seattle City Council](#) and [Association of Washington Cities](#) joined the call last year.

Wineberry said late last month that he has been pushing the governor to roll back the earlier directive.

"Why don't you have your Abraham Lincoln moment and free communities of color and everybody ... why don't you free them?" Wineberry said in an interview.

It remains to be seen what exactly Inslee's order will do. But the 2017 opinion from the state AG's office noted the ban still allows state government leeway to pursue some policies aimed at increasing diversity in contracting and employment.

"The measure allows the use of measures that take race or gender into account in state contracting without elevating a less qualified contractor over a more qualified contractor," [according to the opinion](#). "In narrow circumstances, an agency may be allowed to use a narrowly tailored preference based on race or sex when no other means is available to remedy demonstrated discrimination in state contracting.

"State agencies may also employ race- or sex-based preferences when necessary to do so in order to avoid losing eligibility for programs providing federal funds," it continued.

An analysis by the state Office of Minority and Women's Business Enterprises has shown that certified small businesses owned by people of color lost ground in contracting after the 1998 affirmative action ban.

[Between 1994 and 1998](#), Washington agencies spent roughly 10% per year on eligible contracts, services and goods with certified women- and minority-owned small businesses.

By contrast, those businesses in fiscal year 2018 earned about 3.6% of state-procured contracts, goods and services.

Opponents of affirmative action have dismissed that analysis, saying women and people of color had less of a reason to become certified after the ban and thus contracts might not be included in those figures.

Advocates for businesses owned by women and people of color welcomed the news Friday.

"We have been waiting for quite some time for this to happen and we are glad to hear that he's announcing this," said Vicky Schiantarelli, secretary of the Washington chapter of the National Association of Minority Contractors.

	<p>The change will allow state agencies to consider contractors’ “inclusion plans” in which they lay out plans to hire and support small firms, including those owned by women and people of color, Schiantarelli said.</p> <p>“What this will allow us to do is look at the big picture in making sure folks are being inclusive in what they’re submitting,” Schiantarelli said.</p> <p>The change “will benefit us to now be back in the loop for economic opportunities we’ve been deprived of since the governor’s directive,” said Lynn French, a former budget analyst for the state Senate who owns a consulting firm and was among those urging Inslee to rescind the order.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/07 Torrential rains break records western WA
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/weather/torrential-rain-breaks-records-across-western-washington-heres-when-it-will-dry-out/
GIST	<p>How wet was Thursday? Wet, very wet.</p> <p>It was Seattle’s seventh-wettest January day ever, with 2 inches recorded at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. Another .32 inches or so had been recorded by Friday morning, according to the National Weather Service of Seattle.</p> <p>Hoquiam got 5.78 inches of rain on Thursday and had about 6.21 inches by Friday morning, making it the coastal city’s wettest day ever on record, according to meteorologist Gary Schneider.</p> <p>Shelton got 4.5 inches of rain on Thursday, and Olympia had a total through Friday morning of about 4.64. inches, he said.</p> <p>The tiny city of Rainier, southeast of Olympia in Thurston County, got a record 10 inches of rain in 24 hours.</p> <p>A 20-mile stretch of Interstate 5 just south of Chehalis was closed Friday morning for several hours because of Chehalis River flooding. Lanes in both directions opened shortly before 1 p.m., according to the Washington State Department of Transportation.</p> <p>There will still be some showers and rain in Western Washington through the rest of Friday, but the big rainstorm has moved east, Schneider said.</p> <p>In Issaquah, Front Street North remained closed Friday morning because of water on the roadway.</p> <p>Snow is expected to continue in the mountains, where all primary cross-state passes — Snoqualmie, Stevens, White — remain closed. All three, along with Blewett Pass, will likely remain closed until Sunday, according to the Washington State Department of Transportation.</p> <p>The last time the region was cut off to this extent was back in February 1996 when all mountain passes through the Cascades were closed, as well as the Columbia Gorge, Interstate 5 and Canada 1, according to meteorologist Ted Buehner.</p> <p>An atmospheric river had dumped a load of rain in southwest Washington and Oregon as well as heavy snow in the passes and spots of freezing rain, he said.</p> <p>Those conditions produced avalanches from southern British Columbia south into the Columbia Gorge, closing all the highways, he said. “I-5 went underwater through the Chehalis/Centralia area and a landslide closed I-5 near Woodland as well.”</p> <p>Western Washington was left completely cut off with the exception of the bridges across the Columbia River at Kelso and Astoria, Buehner said.</p>

HEADLINE	01/07 Leavenworth 'record-breaking snowfall'
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/weather/leavenworth-declares-emergency-after-record-breaking-snowfall/
GIST	<p>Leavenworth Mayor Carl Florea has declared a disaster in the city.</p> <p>In a news release posted Friday, the city cited “unprecedented and record-breaking snowfall.”</p> <p>On Thursday, Leavenworth was hit with 36 inches of snow in less than 24 hours. Some pockets saw up to 48 inches in the past 48 hours, “causing concern for life safety and structure stability in the community at large,” the news release said.</p> <p>The declaration allows the city “to use local resources that can aid quickly,” and is a “pre-requisite for state and federal emergency aid funding,” according to the release.</p> <p>Mayor Florea also authorized Public Works Director Tom Wachholder to request aid from the National Guard “for assistance with citizen welfare checks, food delivery, general snow cleanup and private driveway snow removal,” the release noted.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/07 Local school districts 'may need to close'
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/your-local-school-district-may-need-to-close-temporarily-washington-state-superintendent-warns/
GIST	<p>Between omicron, school staff shortages and chaotic winter weather, “Your local school district may need to close” temporarily over the next three or four weeks, Washington state schools Superintendent Chris Reykdal said Friday.</p> <p>Reykdal, who has been in lockstep with Gov. Jay Inslee about the need to keep schools open through all seasons of the pandemic, said that while state-mandated preventive measures still make schools among the safer public spaces, a lack of staff — caused either indirectly or directly by the virus — may force a district or individual school building to shut down.</p> <p>“It is our No. 1 priority to keep the school in-person,” said Reykdal during a news conference Friday. “Although we’re really challenged with omicron.”</p> <p>Students and educators around the state returned to school buildings after a holiday break that saw COVID-19 cases skyrocket here and across the nation with the spread of the omicron variant, a reportedly milder strain of the coronavirus for those who are vaccinated. In those who are unvaccinated, an infection can still result in serious illness. Seven or eight school districts and school buildings closed down this week as they buckled under the strain of multiple headwinds, Reykdal said.</p> <p>“I’m hearing that a number of educators are having as much as half or more of their class missing,” said Julie Popper, a spokesperson for the statewide teachers union speaking on behalf of the Seattle Education Association, the union representing many public school staff in Seattle. “There’s a lot of frustration around that because that means they’re going to have to repeat lessons.”</p> <p>School nurses in particular have been exhausted, she added.</p> <p>Still, Popper said, educators generally want schools to stay open, because in-person learning is best, but the dire situation calls for more safety precautions. Inslee’s announcement this week that the state will send masks, including KN95s, and at-home testing kits to schools should help, she added, provided districts follow through on their distribution.</p>

Around 42% of students are fully vaccinated in Washington, Reykdal said during the news conference. Ninety percent of teachers are vaccinated.

When outbreaks occur, the state Department of Health advises that school districts use a “cascading closures” approach, starting with small-scale cancellations of extracurriculars, then classrooms, schools and entire districts if necessary. Like Reykdal, state health officials also stressed this week that in-person schooling is still [“the best option for kids.”](#)

In addition to temporary absences caused by coronavirus infections, schools have had difficulty [maintaining staffing](#) for some of the most essential jobs in schools, including paraeducators and substitute teachers.

And, over the course of the fall, schools and entire districts closed temporarily as they saw thin margins in staffing, including Seattle Public Schools and the Bellevue School District, which closed for one day around the Veterans Day holiday.

While Inslee’s emergency order forcing schools to offer in-person instruction during the pandemic remains in effect, there are cases in which school districts are allowed to physically close out of a need to quarantine, if there aren’t enough staff or because of weather, said Reykdal.

When districts or school buildings close for quarantine purposes, [state guidance](#) requires that they provide remote learning in which at least 70% of the instruction is live.

Last week, several school districts in the Seattle area were [preparing for the possibility](#) should a temporary switch become necessary, but none released any concrete plans or indicated how likely the switch would be in the coming weeks.

Reykdal stressed that the pressures straining schools should begin to subside in the next month as cases peak.

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HEADLINE	01/07 Record Covid cases continue in King Co.
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/record-covid-cases-continue-in-king-county-heres-when-omicron-could-peak/
GIST	<p>King County continues to battle high coronavirus infections and hospitalizations, with new records emerging every week as the omicron variant continues to surge through the region. But health officials and researchers predicted this week a peak could be approaching.</p> <p>As of Friday morning, King County was reporting a “record-breaking” average of 3,323 coronavirus infections, 34 hospitalizations and two deaths per day, said Dr. Jeff Duchin, the county’s public health officer. The current seven-day average case rate is more than four times the county’s previous peak in November 2020, he added.</p> <p>Youth rates are generally lower, with highest case rates among those ages 18 to 35.</p> <p>People who are unvaccinated continue to be at the highest risk of becoming infected and seriously ill, he said. For the past month, those who are unvaccinated are about two-and-a-half times more likely of getting infected and 13 times more likely to be hospitalized for COVID-19 than those who have received shots, according to data from Public Health – Seattle & King County.</p> <p>Vaccinated people continue to be most protected from severe illness and death.</p> <p>Duchin’s message Friday was clear — along with getting vaccinated and boosted, residents should do their best to limit indoor activities and avoid crowded and poorly ventilated indoor spaces. He also encouraged people to use high-quality, well-fitted respirators and masks.</p>

“With omicron, even vaccinated and boosted people tend to become infected and spread the infection to others, so we can’t rely on vaccination alone when transmission levels are this high,” he said. “We need to use the same multiple layers of protection we’ve used in the past.”

Hospitalizations are up about fivefold since mid-December, and as of Friday, King County hospitals were caring for about 400 COVID patients, the highest number the county’s seen to date. The previous peak came in early August with about 331 daily hospitalizations.

Hospitalizations are currently hitting those ages 40 to 69 and over 70 the hardest, while youth hospitalization rates remain lower, Duchin said.

The county reports 33 deaths in the past two weeks, compared to 17 during the prior two weeks, but Duchin said officials are still waiting to see how death trends might be affected.

“The current hospitalization rate of 10.7 per 100,000 over seven days is close to the winter 2020 peak, and we expect hospitalizations to continue to rise and health care system stress to continue to increase for several weeks after cases peak,” he said.

Omicron’s peak nears?

Some researchers have predicted the rise in omicron cases could peak in mid-January, Duchin said, but “we can’t know with certainty.”

Earlier this week, Seattle computational biologist Trevor Bedford, a Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center scientist who’s been tracking the virus since the start of the pandemic, [noted on Twitter](#) that in many states, including Washington, omicron cases were steadily doubling in early December before surpassing the delta variant in mid- to late-December.

Since then, as prevalence has increased, the variant has slightly slowed its spread — though cases haven’t yet peaked — Bedford wrote.

“At a certain point, there’s going to be so many people infected that this virus is going to have a hard time finding new people to infect and things are going to start slowing down,” Duchin said. “... I would expect because of how many people became infected so rapidly that, in fact, we would see a more rapid decline than we saw with variants that were less infectious.”

While we can draw some conclusions about what to expect from omicron’s spread in other countries, particularly in the U.K., Duchin emphasized again how “unpredictable this disease is, and how fraught any sort of prediction about COVID-19 is.”

Meanwhile, rapid tests and testing appointments remain in high demand in King County and throughout the state, though some help is on the way.

Starting Monday, Duchin said [the first shipment of 100,000 rapid tests from manufacturers will begin being distributed in King County](#), directed first to long-term care centers, emergency medical service providers, health care facilities and other centers with urgent needs.

Community health centers and testing sites will also receive kits, he said.

The county also expects to receive up to 10,000 rapid tests a week from the state Department of Health, and has requested support from federal agencies to staff testing sites.

“The people of King County have done such a remarkable job of limiting COVID-19 throughout this pandemic,” Duchin said. “... Now, with omicron, we need to use multiple layers of protection again.”

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SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/weather/record-snow-serious-flooding-left-seattle-area-cut-off-from-washington-state-country/
GIST	<p>Snoqualmie Pass? Closed.</p> <p>Stevens Pass? Closed.</p> <p>White Pass, Blewett Pass and Interstate 5? Closed, closed and closed.</p> <p>For much of Friday, record snow in the Cascade Mountains and serious flooding in the Chehalis River Basin shut down nearly all of the major road and train routes connecting the Seattle area to much of the state and the rest of the country.</p> <p>Gov. Jay Inslee issued an emergency proclamation Friday afternoon, citing extreme weather, hazardous driving conditions, road closures and flooding. The proclamation directed state agencies to mobilize resources in connection with local jurisdiction and activated the National Guard and State Guard to provide help.</p> <p>“We’ve had so much snow on the mountains and also rivers flooding” in the lowlands, plus landslides and strong wind in spots, Samantha Borth, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Seattle, said Friday afternoon. “It’s a pretty unique situation.”</p> <p>Though a 20-mile stretch of I-5 between Grand Mound and Chehalis reopened Friday afternoon, thanks to receding flood waters, officials said the passes would likely remain closed until Sunday.</p> <p>In the meantime, the closures and the extreme weather conditions that caused them, including avalanche risks and torrential rain, isolated millions of residents Friday, separating Seattle from Portland and Western Washington from Eastern Washington.</p> <p>The last time the region was cut off so much was in 1996, when an “atmospheric river” gushed overhead, closing the passes and I-5, said NWS meteorologist Ted Buehner.</p> <p>This week, there were disruptions at every level of commerce, as international shipments loitered in warehouses, produce waited on trucks and residents delayed supermarket trips.</p> <p>Travel plans were scuttled, hospital operations were complicated and learning was postponed, as Washington State University canceled classes for next Monday and Tuesday to allow students more time to return to Pullman from Western Washington.</p> <p>The surging rain and snow created problems not only on the passes and around Chehalis, in Lewis County, but in communities across the region.</p> <p>Flooding closed streets in downtown Issaquah, as residents grabbed sandbags at a community center to protect their properties. First responders in Seattle rescued a man as his house slid downhill in Magnolia. In East King County, some Skykomish residents were trapped by unplowed snow.</p> <p>In Wenatchee, stranded Amtrak passengers waited in vain on a snowy train platform for the conductor to call them aboard. Amtrak service between Seattle and Portland was halted.</p> <p>After Leavenworth was buried under 36 inches of snow Thursday, the mayor issued an emergency declaration asking for National Guard assistance.</p> <p>Record precipitation Rain and snow slammed the state in historic proportions this week, setting the stage for swollen rivers and avalanche concerns Friday.</p>

The culprit was a warm front that stalled over Western Washington between Wednesday night and Friday morning, rather than moving past quickly, like usual, Borth said.

The Washington State Department of Transportation reported 26 inches of snow at Snoqualmie Pass from Thursday to mid-Friday, on top of 280 inches earlier this winter. Winds remained high Friday night but conditions were starting to dry out.

Thursday was Seattle's seventh-wettest January day ever, with 2 inches of rain recorded at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport; another half inch was recorded Friday.

Hoquiam accumulated nearly 6 inches Thursday, setting a record for the Grays Harbor County city, while Shelton in Mason County accumulated 4 ½ inches. The clouds dumped a record 10 inches of rain over 24 hours on the tiny city of Rainier, near Olympia.

"All that precipitation" surged into rivers, Borth said. And snow melt from holiday storms played a role.

Soils were saturated before the major storm even began, she added, blaming that mix for the increase in landslides. Winds whipped Whidbey Island.

Though rain continued at times Friday across Western Washington, Borth said the major storm had moved on. She predicted showers over the weekend, with some possible sun breaks.

"We'll have another (storm) system brushing the area but nothing compared to what we've just seen," she said. "Sunday looks pretty nice, in comparison."

Road closures

The weather conditions blocked truck routes Friday, gumming up a sector that averages \$42 million of cargo moved in Washington state each day, including perishable products like milk.

National Guard members were deployed to the flooding in Lewis County to fill sandbags. By the time the stretch of I-5 near Chehalis reopened, all 99 truck parking spaces were occupied at the Pilot Travel Center, north of the closure, said manager Cynthia Willis. Some were heading south, and others were waiting to head east, over the mountains.

The drivers, many heading to Wyoming or Montana, spent the day calmly waiting in their rigs or eating fast food, said Willis, who was taking reservations through Monday.

"Everybody's cool, nobody's mad. Everybody knows they're not going anywhere," she said.

Roughly 100 miles east and 2,500 feet higher, up on Snoqualmie Pass, work crews spent Friday on avalanche control tasks. They focused on three large avalanche chutes along Interstate 90 west of the pass, using explosives to loosen the snow, said WSDOT regional spokesperson Summer Derrey.

The work is done using semi-permanent cables and pulleys carrying explosives up the slopes. Workers propel the system using a bicycle-type machine — sort of like a ski lift for dynamite.

Besides those two chutes, crews west of the pass counted 38 natural slides of snow, ice, rocks and trees, Derrey said, adding, "Our avalanche crew is exhausted; they've been working around the clock."

East of the pass on I-90, workers began plowing lanes between Hyak and Easton. In at least one location, they scraped two lanes to ice or slush, a WSDOT video showed. The agency currently has sufficient plowing crew, with workers who live mostly around Cle Elum and have managed to sleep at home at night, Derrey said.

Limited travel on I-90 is being allowed, for residents and workers only, between Ellensburg and Cle Elum, where local drivers must pass checkpoints to proceed, Derrey said.

Out and about

Caregivers scheduled to work Friday at Providence hospital in Centralia were called in Thursday night, with officials anticipating Chehalis Basin flooding would make morning commutes difficult; I-5 is the main route to Providence. The hospital set up cots for those caregivers, said spokesperson Chris Thomas.

Although some emergency vehicles were allowed through during the I-5 closure, Providence's emergency department accepted only patients from Lewis County. Patients from outside of the county were redirected either north or south.

In Issaquah, residents worked through Thursday night into Friday morning to shield their homes with sandbags. At least one apartment building was evacuated after Issaquah Creek spilled over its banks and into the parking lot under the building.

Elsewhere in the same neighborhood, Dana Zuber's entire yard was underwater. Perched on the porch of the house where she's lived for 35 years, she described the flooding as the worst she'd ever seen.

Business owners along Front Street North watched water lap at the sandbags protecting their stores, as vehicles zoomed down the mostly flooded road. Adam Shaeffer's Downhill Zone, a bicycle repair shop, was still dry, he said.

The Seattle rescue happened at a home in Magnolia, on Perkins Lane West. A man was trapped in the basement when the home slid, according to the fire department. A woman was able to escape on her own but a dog died and another was missing.

The incident appeared to have been caused by heavy rains; the steep slope where the home is located has a history of landslides, said Bryan Stevens, a spokesperson for the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections.

The deluge caused a sewer overflow into Lake Washington near Medina Park Beach for an hour and a half Friday afternoon.

In Skykomish, Daniel Casey was trying to get attention from officials, begging King County to plow the snow off his street. As of Friday, Casey said he had been without power and unable to leave his home for multiple days, relying on a generator to keep his lights on as snow continued to come down.

"Lots of people up here don't have money. They don't have generators," he said. "I just hope nobody has died because of this."

In Leavenworth, a Facebook post by the city said National Guard help was needed for snow removal, food delivery and checking on residents. The post said some spots had received 48 inches of snow over two days, "causing concern for life safety and structure stability."

Bothell resident Megan Davis was stuck Friday in Wenatchee, unable to drive back over the mountains with her husband and two children after a couple of days of winter activities.

"I've never seen so much snow in one night, ever," she said.

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HEADLINE	01/07 King Co. official: omicron challenging
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3304420/king-county-dr-jeff-duchin-omicron-surge-update-january-2022/
GIST	The omicron variant continues to stress health care systems across King County, with hospitalizations and COVID-19 cases continuing to rise.

As Seattle-King County Public Health Officer Dr. Jeff Duchin noted in a Friday briefing, “omicron is challenging us in new ways.”

“The speed of spread from omicron has been mind-boggling,” he said. “Our University of Washington colleagues estimate omicron is currently responsible for 90% of COVID-19 [cases] just a month after it was detected.”

As of this last week, King County has averaged over 3,300 cases a day, roughly four times what it saw during the November 2020 surge, and 12 times more than what it experienced in early December of 2021.

Hospitalizations have trended up as well, with a five-fold increase since mid-December. According to Duchin, on average, one person is being hospitalized for COVID-19 in King County every 45 minutes.

Between that surge, an increase in non-COVID-related hospitalizations, and staffing shortages, omicron is “stressing our hospitals now more than ever.” And while the variant generally produces more mild cases of COVID-19, it is “not necessarily milder on communities.”

“While it’s true that it’s uncomplicated for most people, it’s not a mild illness for many,” Duchin pointed out. “The potential for long COVID remains, and its impact on our community and our health care system’s ability to provide us with the care we need makes it equally if not more severe than past variants.”

Based on trends in other countries, he predicts that this current surge could potentially peak sometime in mid-January, although it is also “likely to continue to impact us for many weeks” after that.

“Things are likely to get more difficult before they get better,” he warned. “Plan for large numbers of people being ill in a short time frame, and resulting absenteeism in workplaces and its effect on operations.”

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HEADLINE	01/07 Grim milestone: 10,004 Covid deaths
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3304657/washington-covid-19-deaths-over-10000/
GIST	<p>Washington hit a grim milestone on Friday, cresting 10,000 COVID-19 deaths since the start of the pandemic in early 2020.</p> <p>In total, the state reports 10,004 COVID deaths, along with over 820,000 total cases, and 47,062 hospitalizations, with a 1.1% rate of death for those who tested positive for the virus.</p> <p>The largest portion of deaths comes from King County, which reports nearly 2,200. Despite rapid increases in cases brought on by the omicron variant, deaths in the county have remained relatively steady since November of 2021, averaging between 1-3 a day.</p> <p>State health leaders continue to emphasize that the best way to avoid a severe case of COVID-19 is to get vaccinated. Around 63% of the state’s total population has been fully vaccinated, as well as 73.8% for those ages 12 and up.</p> <p>Some counties continue to lag behind in vaccination rates, though. That includes Stevens County, which currently sits at a 33.2% vaccination rate across all demographics, as well as Skamania (37.2%), Ferry (38.7%), Asotin (37.5%), and Pend Oreille (36.7%) counties.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/07 FinalSite discloses ransomware attack
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/finalsites-discloses-ransomware-attack-that-crippled-websites-for-8000-schools/
GIST	<p>A ransomware attack on FinalSite, a cloud-based web hosting provider specialized in school and educational websites, has crippled the school portals and web services of more than 8,000 schools across more than 110 countries.</p> <p>“On Tuesday, January 4, our team identified the presence of ransomware on certain systems in our environment,” FinalSite said in a status update last night.</p> <p>Despite the prolonged outage that has impacted thousands of schools, the company said it couldn’t disclose the incident until yesterday due to an ongoing investigation.</p> <p>FinalSite said it has taken affected systems offline and has recovered and restored most affected websites already.</p> <p>“While we still have work to do, the vast majority of front-facing websites are online. Some sites may still lack proper styling, admin log-in functionality, calendar events, or constituent directories, but the team is currently working to restore these elements,” it said.</p> <p>Some schools were severely impacted</p> <p>But the incident has had a severe impact on schools that use FinalSite, many of which have lost the ability to notify parents by email or through messages posted on their main sites.</p> <p>“Many districts are complaining that they are unable to use their emergency notification system to warn their communities about closures due to weather or COVID-19 protocol,” one of the FinalSite customers said in a Reddit thread last night, after the company disclosed the attack.</p> <p>Some schools had backup notification systems in place, but even so, their activity was still disrupted either way, even if in a more limited fashion.</p> <p>“It’s mostly about transparency. They [FinalSite] haven’t told us anything important except they had an outage,” one of the FinalSite customers told <i>The Record</i> via Reddit. “Outages are usually one or two hours long. We were not prepared. We thought we’d have everything up and running by the end of the day, not week.”</p> <p>FinalSite is restoring from backups</p> <p>Nevertheless, FinalSite said that despite the crippling attack that has encrypted some of their servers, they are now successfully restoring from backups.</p> <p>“We have full access to our files and data. The forensic investigation is ongoing and at this time, we have no evidence that our data or client data has been taken,” FinalSite said yesterday.</p> <p>No details are currently available about how the attackers gained access to FinalSite’s infrastructure or what type of ransomware was used in the attack. The company promised to share more details as it deals with the attack’s aftermath and restores affected systems.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Patchwork APT targets Pakistan entities
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/01/badnews-patchwork-apt-hackers-score-own.html
GIST	Threat hunters have shed light on the tactics, techniques, and procedures embraced by an Indian-origin hacking group called Patchwork as part of a renewed campaign that commenced in late November 2021, targeting Pakistani government entities and individuals with a research focus on molecular medicine and biological science.

"Ironically, all the information we gathered was possible thanks to the threat actor infecting themselves with their own [remote access trojan], resulting in captured keystrokes and screenshots of their own computer and virtual machines," Malwarebytes Threat Intelligence Team [said](#) in a report published on Friday.

Prominent victims that were successfully infiltrated include Pakistan's Ministry of Defense, National Defence University of Islamabad, Faculty of Bio-Sciences at UVAS Lahore, International Center for Chemical and Biological Sciences (ICCBS), H.E.J. Research Institute of Chemistry, and the Salim Habib University (SBU).

Believed to have been active since 2015, [Patchwork APT](#) is also [tracked](#) by the wider cybersecurity community under the monikers Dropping Elephant, Chinastrats (Kaspersky), Quilted Tiger (CrowdStrike), Monsoon (Forcepoint), Zinc Emerson, TG-4410 (SecureWorks), and APT-C-09 (Qihoo 360).

The espionage group, primarily known for striking diplomatic and government agencies in Pakistan, China, U.S. think tanks, and other targets located in the Indian subcontinent via spear-phishing campaigns, gets its name from the fact that most of the code used for its malware tooling was copied and pasted from various sources publicly available on the web.

"The code used by this threat actor is copy-pasted from various online forums, in a way that reminds us of a patchwork quilt," researchers from the now-defunct Israeli cybersecurity startup Cymmetria [noted](#) in its findings published in July 2016.

Over the years, successive covert operations staged by the actor have attempted to drop and execute [QuasarRAT](#) as well as an implant named [BADNEWS](#) that acts as a backdoor for the attackers, providing them with full control over the victim machine. In January 2021, the threat group was also [observed](#) exploiting a remote code execution vulnerability in Microsoft Office ([CVE-2017-0261](#)) to deliver payloads on victim machines.

The latest campaign is no different in that the adversary lures potential targets with RTF documents impersonating Pakistani authorities that ultimately act as a conduit for deploying a new variant of the BADNEWS trojan called Ragnatela — meaning "spider web" in Italian — enabling the operators to execute arbitrary commands, capture keystrokes and screenshots, list and upload files, and download additional malware.

The new lures, which purport to be from the Pakistan Defence Officers Housing Authority ([DHA](#)) in Karachi, contains an exploit for Microsoft Equation Editor that's triggered to compromise the victim's computer and execute the Ragnatela payload.

But in what's a case of OpSec failure, the threat actor also ended up infecting their own development machine with the RAT, as Malwarebytes was able to unmask a number of its tactics, including the use of dual keyboard layouts (English and Indian) as well as the adoption of virtual machines and VPNs such as VPN Secure and CyberGhost to conceal their IP address.

"While they continue to use the same lures and RAT, the group has shown interest in a new kind of target," the researchers concluded. "Indeed, this is the first time we have observed Patchwork targeting molecular medicine and biological science researchers."

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HEADLINE	01/07 Cyber Command partners w/84 universities
SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/careers/cyber-command-announces-partnership-84-universities
GIST	U.S. Cyber Command announced it will partner with 84 universities across 34 states this year as part of a program to build up the nation's cybersecurity workforce and familiarize students with military cyber programs .

The partnership, part of the agency's Academic Engagement Network, will give students at the university access to guest lecturers from [U.S. CyberCom officials](#), non-public webinars about "pressing technical problems and non-technical problems" in cyberspace and other communications about changes in the cyber domain from the military agency.

According to an announcement, U.S. Cyber Command Executive Director David Frederick held a virtual meeting with representatives from the schools on Thursday to provide details on specific programs and plans that will be offered over the next nine months. The engagements will be structured around four lines of effort that will "serve as an investment in creating a robust and accessible pool of qualified cyber professionals, including future workforce issues, applied cyber research, applied analytics and strategic issues.

"Cyber Command's goal for the AEN is to strengthen our relationships and communication with these participating institutions," Frederick said in a statement. "This will improve and sustain our efforts to meet cyberspace educational requirements and workforce needs."

The participating universities were not named; SC Media has contacted U.S. Cyber Command's media office for a full list of the partners, and is awaiting a response. Of the 84 partners, CyberCom said 69 are universities, 13 are community colleges, nine are minority serving institutions and four are military war and staff colleges.

To be eligible for a partnership, schools must offer accredited two-year, four-year or post-graduate degree programs around cybersecurity and offer specialization or courses in computer science, cyber related engineering, cyber law, intelligence, applied analytics and other subjects with a nexus to cybersecurity. Cyber Command officials plan to offer additional details on the program and partnerships in a follow-on briefing in the near future.

The program represents another quiver in the arrow as [the Department of Defense and other agencies](#) have struggled to [recruit and retain top cybersecurity talent](#) in the face of heightened threats in cyberspace from geopolitical rivals like China, Russia and Iran and waves of [ransomware attacks against critical infrastructure](#), schools and local governments.

The latest defense authorization [bill](#), which was signed into law by President Joe Biden last month, gives the commander of U.S. Cyber Command new authorities to stand up personnel management programs to "facilitate the recruitment of eminent experts in computer science, data science, engineering, mathematics and computer network exploitation." It also mandated that DoD develop a pilot program that would train hiring offices at the Pentagon in how to attract and retain technical talent.

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HEADLINE	01/07 HHS: Mespinoza ongoing healthcare threat
SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/ransomware/mespinoza-pysa-ransomware-an-ongoing-threat-to-the-healthcare-sector-hhs-warns
GIST	<p>A new Department of Health and Human Services Cybersecurity Program alert is reminding the healthcare sector of ongoing cyberattacks by the Mespinoza cybercriminal group, which has highly targeted the healthcare sector over the last two years with Pysa ransomware and other cyber threats.</p> <p>HHS previously found that Pysa is among the top 10 ransomware threats to healthcare. It's a cross-platform variant "and versions are developed in both the C++ and Python languages."</p> <p>"Although the Pysa variant has only been known to be operating since December 2019, it quickly became one of the more prolific threats against healthcare," according to the alert. Data shows that "Pysa was one of the most aggressive among all ransomware groups in targeting healthcare over the last two years."</p>

Given [the continued threat Mespinoza poses to healthcare](#), HHS is urging healthcare provider organizations to review the alert and adhere to industry-standard ransomware guidance to prevent successful exploits. The alert contains indicators of compromise and attack methods.

Mespinoza operates the “Pysa’s Partners” data leak site that leans on data extortion techniques to compel victims to pay. The U.S. is the group’s top target, which includes a range of sectors, such as education, utilities, and business services.

But the hackers have most notably targeted the public health and healthcare sectors over the last two years. In fact, while a number of threat actors falsely claimed they would leave healthcare providers alone during the COVID-19 pandemic, Mespinoza made it a point to both threaten and follow through with healthcare-specific attacks.

One of the most [recent Pysa leaks](#) was a post of multiple zip files the group claimed to have stolen from One Community Health, Woodholme Gastroenterology Associates, and Spartanburg & Pelham OB-GYN in September 2021.

Other purported healthcare victims include Assured Imaging, [Nonin Medical](#), Piedmont Orthopedics/OrthoAtlanta. Assured Imaging is currently fighting a class-action lawsuit, after Mespinoza posted patient data allegedly stolen from the Arizona provider.

First observed in October 2018, the group is financially motivated. Outside of Pysa, Mespinoza leverages a number of tools that include ADRecon, Advanced Port Scanner, DNSGo RAT, Mimikatz, PEASS, and PowerShell Empire.

HHS warns that as of November 2021, the group has claimed 190 global victims through ransomware attacks alone — six of which were from the healthcare sector. [Cyber Peace Institute research](#) shows Pysa launched some of the largest ransomware attacks against healthcare targets during the pandemic.

The HHS alert details the standard execution flow Pysa follows during its attack, including how it begins through the creation of a mutual object exclusion “which it does for the same reason legitimate applications do — to ensure two processes or threads don’t attempt to write to the same memory space simultaneously.”

And much like other ongoing sophisticated threats, Pysa is also known to perform basic reconnaissance functions on the victim’s drives by leveraging the GetLogicalDriveStringsW, GetDriveTypeW, and CreateThread APIs.

Healthcare organizations should review the alert to find deep-dive insights into the IOCs and attack methods to assess their systems for key vulnerabilities, particularly as Pysa is known to leverage remote desktop protocol, PowerShell Empire, and Kodiak for its C2 communications.

Further, Pysa’s fundamental attack methods are not significantly different than other ransomware variants. Rather, the concern is the aggressive nature of the attack flow. As such, healthcare providers can rely on previously provided ransomware insights to shore up defenses.

HHS Office for Civil Rights [previously released](#) guidance for highly targeted ransomware attacks, while Mitre has a [ransomware resource](#) page specific to the healthcare sector.

The HHS alert also reminds healthcare organizations of the importance of employing defense-in-depth measures, an effective vulnerability management program, and the principle-of-least-privilege, along with leaning on multiple layers of filtering and threat detection applications.

“An effort should be made to constantly gather and deploy indicators of compromise in accordance with the organizational risk management plan. It’s worth noting that infrastructure associated IoCs often are

	often abandoned by cybercriminals after they become public but can also be reused over time as well,” HHS concluded.
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HEADLINE	01/07 New macOS malware families emerge
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/eight-new-macos-malware-families-emerged-2021
GIST	<p>Eight new macOS malware families emerged in 2021, according to Patrick Wardle, a security researcher who specializes in Apple products.</p> <p>The new macOS malware spotted in 2021 includes ElectroRAT, SilverSparrow, XcodeSpy, ElectrumStealer, WildPressure, XLoader, ZuRu, and CDDS (aka MacMa).</p> <p>Wardle has published a blog post describing each of these pieces of malware, including their infection vector, persistence mechanism, features, and goals. He has also shared samples of each malware to allow others to conduct their own analysis.</p> <p>ElectroRAT, a cross-platform RAT designed to steal cryptocurrency, emerged in January. The malware has been delivered via trojanized applications and its capabilities include keylogging, taking screenshots, downloading/uploading files, and executing commands.</p> <p>SilverSparrow was discovered in February and it affected roughly 30,000 macOS devices, but it remains a mysterious piece of malware as it’s still unclear exactly how it was distributed and what its end goal was — its second payload was not identified — but the best guess is that it delivered adware.</p> <p>XcodeSpy emerged in March and it appeared to be aimed at software developers. It was delivered via malicious Xcode projects and it installed a custom variant of the backdoor named EggShell, which allows its operators to spy on users.</p> <p>ElectrumStealer, also uncovered in March, leveraged a backdoored Electrum wallet to steal cryptocurrencies from infected systems. The threat had been inadvertently notarized by Apple.</p> <p>The existence of WildPressure for macOS was disclosed in July, after it had been seen targeting industrial organizations in the Middle East. The WildPressure campaign is believed to have started in May 2019, but it initially only involved Windows malware.</p> <p>XLoader is a cross-platform piece of malware designed to steal passwords. It has been described as the macOS evolution of the Formbook malware.</p> <p>ZuRu emerged in China in September, when it was observed spreading via sponsored Baidu search results. The malware delivered sponsored ads and trojanized applications.</p> <p>The last piece of malware identified in 2021 is CDDS (MacMa), which was spotted by Google. A sophisticated threat actor had been exploiting a macOS zero-day vulnerability to deliver CDDS to users in Hong Kong via watering hole websites.</p> <p>“With the continued growth and popularity of macOS (especially in the enterprise!), 2022 will surely bring a bevy of new macOS malware,” Wardle concluded.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/07 NHS: Log4Shell VMware Horizon exploited
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/nhs-warns-of-hackers-exploiting-log4shell-in-vmware-horizon/
GIST	UK's National Health Service (NHS) has published a cyber alert warning of an unknown threat group targeting VMware Horizon deployments with Log4Shell exploits.

Log4Shell is an exploit for [CVE-2021-44228](#), a critical arbitrary remote code execution flaw in the Apache Log4j 2.14, which has been under active and [high-volume exploitation](#) since December 2021.

Apache addressed the above and four more vulnerabilities via subsequent security updates, and [Log4j version 2.17.1](#) is now considered adequately secure.

Targeting Apache Tomcat in VMware Horizon

According to the NHS notice, the actor is leveraging the exploit to achieve remote code execution on vulnerable VMware Horizon deployments on public infrastructure.

"The attack likely consists of a reconnaissance phase, where the attacker uses the Java Naming and Directory Interface™ (JNDI) via Log4Shell payloads to call back to malicious infrastructure," [explains the alert](#).

"Once a weakness has been identified, the attack then uses the Lightweight Directory Access Protocol (LDAP) to retrieve and execute a malicious Java class file that injects a web shell into the VM Blast Secure Gateway service."

"The web shell can then be used by an attacker to carry out a number of malicious activities such as deploying additional malicious software, data exfiltration, or deployment of ransomware."

The actor is taking advantage of the presence of the Apache Tomcat service embedded within VMware Horizon, which is vulnerable to Log4Shell.

The exploitation begins with the simple and widely used "\${jndi:ldap://example.com}" payload and spawns the following PowerShell command from Tomcat.

This command invokes a win32 service to get a list of 'VMBlastSG' service names, retrieve paths, modify 'absg-worker.js' to drop a listener, and then restart the service to activate the implant.

The listener is then responsible for executing arbitrary commands received via HTTP/HTTPS as header objects with a hardcoded string.

At this point, the actor has established persistent and stable communication with the C2 server and can perform data exfiltration, command execution, or deploy ransomware.

VMware Horizon is not the only VMware product targeted by threat actors using the Log4j vulnerability. The [Conti ransomware operation is also using Log4Shell](#) to spread laterally to vulnerable VMware vCenter servers to more easily encrypt virtual machines.

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HEADLINE	01/07 FBI: FIN7 BadUSB devices to companies
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/fbi-fin7-hackers-target-us-companies-with-badusb-devices-to-install-ransomware/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>The US Federal Bureau of Investigation says that FIN7, an infamous cybercrime group that is behind the Darkside and BlackMatter ransomware operations, has sent malicious USB devices to US companies over the past few months in the hopes of infecting their systems with malware and carrying out future attacks.</p> <p>“Since August 2021, the FBI has received reports of several packages containing these USB devices, sent to US businesses in the transportation, insurance, and defense industries,” the Bureau said in a security alert sent yesterday to US organizations.</p> <p>“The packages were sent using the United States Postal Service and United Parcel Service,” the agency added.</p>

“There are two variations of packages—those imitating HHS [US Department of Health and Human Services] are often accompanied by letters referencing COVID-19 guidelines enclosed with a USB; and those imitating Amazon arrived in a decorative gift box containing a fraudulent thank you letter, counterfeit gift card, and a USB.”

In both cases, the packages contained LilyGO-branded USB devices.

Some BadUSB attacks lead to ransomware

But the FBI says that if recipients plugged the USB thumb drives into their computers, the devices would execute a [BadUSB attack](#), where the USB drive would register itself as a keyboard instead and send a series of preconfigured automated keystrokes to the user’s PC.

These keystrokes would run PowerShell commands that downloaded and installed various malware strains that acted as backdoors for the attackers into the victims’ networks.

In cases investigated by the FBI, the agency said it has seen the group obtain administrative access and then move laterally to other local systems.

“[The] FIN7 actors then used a variety of tools—including Metasploit, Cobalt Strike, PowerShell scripts, Carbanak, GRIFFON, DICELOADER, TIRION—and deployed ransomware, including **BlackMatter** and **REvil**, on the compromised network,” the agency added.

US defense company also targeted

In the most recent case of these attacks, the group also targeted a US defense industry company as recently as November 2021, using the Amazon thank-you letter trick detailed above.

This marks the second alert the FBI has sent about FIN7 mailing malicious USB devices to US companies. The FBI sent the first one in March 2020, after security firm Trustwave found one of the malicious BadUSB devices sent to one of its customers, [a US hospitality provider](#).

Images of the Amazon thank-you letter, the HHS COVID-19 alert, and of the LilyGO-branded BadUSB device are included in the FBI alert, which, we cannot reproduce here. US companies can register on the [InfraGard portal](#) to gain access to the alert and learn more about FIN7’s latest BadUSB attacks.

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HEADLINE	01/07 FluBot malware evolves, targets Europe
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/flubot-malware-now-targets-europe-posing-as-flash-player-app/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>The widely distributed FluBot malware continues to evolve, with new campaigns distributing the malware as Flash Player and the developers adding new features.</p> <p>FluBot is an Android banking trojan that steals credentials by displaying overlay login forms against many banks worldwide.</p> <p>The smishing (SMS phishing) lures for its distribution include fake security updates, fake Adobe Flash Players, voicemail memos, and impersonating parcel delivery notices.</p> <p>Once in the device, FluBot can steal online banking credentials, send or intercept SMS messages (and one-time passwords), and capture screenshots.</p> <p>Because the malware uses the victim's device to send new smishing messages to all their contacts, it usually spreads like wildfire.</p> <p>Impersonating Flash Player</p>

MalwareHunterTeam told BleepingComputer that new FluBot campaigns are distributed using SMS texts asking the recipient if they intended to upload a video from their device.

When recipients click on the included link, they are brought to a page offering a fake Flash Player APK [VirusTotal] that installs the FluBot malware on the Android device.

Android users should always avoid installing apps from APKs hosted at remote sites to protect themselves from malware. This practice is especially true for well-known brands, like Adobe, whose apps should only be installed from trusted locations.

New features in recent FluBot versions

The most recent major release is version 5.0, which came out in early December 2021, while version 5.2 saw the light only a few days ago.

With this release, the DGA (domain generation algorithm) system received much attention from the malware authors, as it's vital in enabling the actors to operate unobstructed.

DGA generates many new C2 domains on the fly, making mitigation measures such as DNS blocklists ineffective.

In its newest version, FluBot's DGA uses 30 top-level domains instead of just three used previously and also features a command that enables attackers to change the seed remotely.

On the communication side, the new FluBot now connects to the C2 through DNS tunneling over HTTPS, whereas previously, it used direct HTTPS port 443.

In summary, FluBot hasn't deprecated any commands used in previous versions and only enriched its capabilities with new ones.

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HEADLINE	01/08 Malicious dnSpy app malware cocktail
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/trojanized-dnspy-app-drops-malware-cocktail-on-researchers-devs/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Hackers targeted cybersecurity researchers and developers this week in a sophisticated malware campaign distributing a malicious version of the dnSpy .NET application to install cryptocurrency stealers, remote access trojans, and miners.</p> <p>dnSpy is a popular debugger and .NET assembly editor used to debug, modify, and decompile .NET programs. Cybersecurity researchers commonly use this program when analyzing .NET malware and software.</p> <p>While the software is no longer actively developed by the initial developers, the original source code and a new actively developed version is available on GitHub to be cloned and modified by anyone.</p> <p>Malicious dnSpy delivers a cocktail of malware</p> <p>This week, a threat actor created a GitHub repository with a compiled version of dnSpy that installs a cocktail of malware, including clipboard hijackers to steal cryptocurrency, the Quasar remote access trojan, a miner, and a variety of unknown payloads.</p> <p>This new campaign was discovered by security researchers Oday enthusiast and MalwareHunterTeam who saw the malicious dnSpy project initially hosted at https://github.com/carbonblackz/dnSpy/ and then switching to https://github.com/isharpdev/dnSpy to appear more convincing.</p> <p>The threat actors also created a website at dnSpy.net that was nicely designed and professional-looking. This site is now down....</p>

The malicious dnSpy application looks like the normal program when executed. It allows you to open .NET applications, debug them, and perform all the normal functions of the program.

However, when the malicious dnSpy application [[VirusTotal](#)] is launched, it will execute a series of commands that create scheduled tasks that run with elevated permissions.

In a [list of the commands](#) shared with BleepingComputer by MalwareHunterTeam, the malware performs the following actions:

- Disables Microsoft Defender
- Uses bitsadmin.exe to download curl.exe to %windir%\system32\curl.exe.
- Uses curl.exe and bitsadmin.exe to download a variety of payloads to the C:\Trash folder and launch them.
- Disables User Account Control.

At this time, both the dnSpy[.net] and the GitHub repository used to power this campaign are shut down. However, security researchers and developers need to constantly be on the lookout for malicious clones of popular projects that install malware on their devices.

Attacks on cybersecurity researchers and developers are not new and are increasingly becoming more common to steal undisclosed vulnerabilities, source code, or gain access to sensitive networks.

Last year, Google and security researchers discovered that state-sponsored North Korean hackers targeted vulnerability researchers using a variety of lures. These lures included [fake Visual Studio projects](#), [Internet Explorer zero-day vulnerabilities](#), [malicious cybersecurity companies](#), and [malicious IDA Pro](#) downloads.

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HEADLINE	01/09 China advanced computer chip makers fail
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/two-chinese-startups-tried-to-catch-up-to-makers-of-advanced-computer-chips-and-failed-11641724382?mod=hp_lead_pos6
GIST	<p>China has spent billions of dollars in recent years trying to catch up to the world's most advanced semiconductor makers.</p> <p>Two foundry projects, led in part by a little-known entrepreneur then in his 30s, help show why China has yet to succeed.</p> <p>The projects, in the Chinese cities of Wuhan and Jinan, were supposed to churn out semiconductors nearly as complex as the more-sophisticated chips made by industry leaders Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. and Samsung Electronics Co. , which have decades of chip-building experience.</p> <p>Chinese officials kicked in hundreds of millions of dollars to support the upstarts. But it quickly became clear the plans had been too ambitious, and local officials had underestimated how difficult—and costly—it is to make complex high-end chips.</p> <p>The two foundries, Wuhan Hongxin Semiconductor Manufacturing Corp. and Quanxin Integrated Circuit Manufacturing (Jinan) Co., burned through cash, yet never commercially built any chips.</p> <p>HSMC formally shut down in June 2021. QXIC still exists but has suspended operations, and didn't respond to requests for comment.</p> <p>Over the past three years, at least six new major chip-building projects, including HSMC and QXIC, have failed in China, according to company statements, state media, local government documents and Tianyancha, a corporate registration database. At least \$2.3 billion went into these projects, much of it coming from governments, the documents showed. Some never produced a single chip.</p>

The Wall Street Journal spoke with a man who identified himself as one of the organizers of the HSMC and QXIC projects. Named Cao Shan in the Tianyancha database, he is listed as the previous chief executive of QXIC, a former board member of HSMC, and a former major shareholder in the firms. The Journal also spoke to former employees of QXIC and other people familiar with the matter for this article.

Beijing leaders and investors are poking through the wreckage of struggling semiconductor businesses in hopes of salvaging some parts, while also writing tougher rules to prevent future waste.

While the government for years has unofficially requested that certain chip makers seek approval for new projects, now approval is required for projects involving more than roughly \$150 million in fixed asset investment, people familiar with the matter said.

In December, Tsinghua Unigroup Co., a Chinese chip conglomerate that defaulted on billions of dollars of bonds over the past year, said a consortium led by two state-backed semiconductor venture-capital firms would become its strategic investor.

Making more semiconductors is a vital priority for China. Chinese chip makers produce about 17% of the chips the country needs, according to International Business Strategies Inc., an industry consulting and analysis firm—leaving China reliant on foreign producers.

When it comes to building the most advanced chips, like ones used for smartphone and computer processors, China—which has been hit by U.S. sanctions restricting some companies from accessing certain chip-making technologies—could fall further behind, experts say.

Two entities involved in China's semiconductor policies, the National Development and Reform Commission of China and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, didn't respond to requests for comment.

Evidence of China's societal frustration over its dependence on foreign chips flared up in late December, after U.S. semiconductor giant Intel Corp. sent a letter asking suppliers to avoid sourcing from the Xinjiang region, where China's government has conducted a campaign of forcible assimilation against religious minorities.

Angry about the perceived slight, Chinese social-media users criticized Intel, with some lamenting China's lack of sufficiently-advanced domestic chips to substitute for Intel's.

Intel apologized and said its letter was written only to comply with U.S. law.

Beijing in around 2014 began unveiling industry-support plans that included a \$22 billion central-government kitty for chip investments, known as the Big Fund. Local governments set up similar funds. In 2019, the state established a second national semiconductor fund of about \$30 billion.

Soon, chip money was sloshing across China. Tens of thousands of Chinese companies registered their businesses as related to semiconductors, including some whose main activities involved restaurants and cement-making, according to the Tianyancha database.

China did improve at some aspects of chip making, including designing chips. But some companies went belly up because they didn't have sufficient expertise or capital, industry experts say.

The Wuhan and Jinan projects were intended to start by making chips with circuitry measured at 14 nanometers or smaller—an area dominated by TSMC and Samsung—before moving on within a few years to 7 nanometers, according to company materials and government documents.

HSMC attracted a former top TSMC executive as chief executive. QXIC recruited dozens of experienced engineers from Taiwan, including from TSMC, with relatively big pay packages, according to former employees.

Soon, according to state media, it became clear that HSMC was far short of the funding needed to make advanced chips, which can cost billions of dollars to produce commercially.

At QXIC, work progressed slowly, former employees said. Although the engineers QXIC recruited had knowledge in technical aspects of chip making, QXIC lacked knowledge to integrate those skills, one of the people said.

In August 2020, Wuhan's local government said the HSMC project was suspended due to financial difficulties, according to state media, and it was formally shut down in 2021.

After several other government-sponsored chip projects also went under, Jinan's government took over QXIC and began letting its employees go, according to people familiar with the matter.

An official at Jinan Innovation Zone, a Jinan government-run business district where QXIC is located, said the company's operations have been suspended.

The Wall Street Journal located the man who identified himself as one of the organizers of the two projects through a phone number associated with one of QXIC's main shareholders in the Tianyancha database.

The man said that while he had used the name Cao Shan in corporate documents, his real name was Bao Enbao. He said he had played an important role in helping assemble technology and talent for the projects and used the pseudonym Cao Shan to avoid potential troubles when recruiting in Taiwan, which has been scrutinizing talent poaching from the mainland.

He said he had around 15 years of experience in the industry, after founding a chip-design firm in 2005, and made connections at TSMC after ordering chips to be made there. When asked about domestic media reports that suggested his conduct wasn't always aboveboard, he said: "Do you think local governments are that easily fooled?"

He said he left the Wuhan project in October 2018 after disagreeing with executives over how to develop it. He said that he left the Jinan project in December 2020 as Beijing increased scrutiny on chip projects, and that in May, Jinan's government pushed the company he runs out as a main shareholder.

The Wuhan and Jinan governments didn't respond to requests for comment.

As troubles emerged at projects like HSMC, Beijing recalibrated its approach. In October 2020, the National Development and Reform Commission, China's economic planner, said that companies without talent, experience and sufficient technology had blindly set up semiconductor projects, and that officials who supported such projects would be held responsible.

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HEADLINE	01/07 Government online surveillance effective?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/07/us-capitol-attack-government-online-surveillance
GIST	<p>In the year since the deadly insurrection at the US Capitol, federal authorities have faced intense scrutiny for failing to detect warning signs on social media.</p> <p>After the 6 January insurrection, the US agency tasked with combatting terrorism and extremism, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), has expanded its monitoring of online activity, with officials touting a new domestic terrorism intelligence branch focused on tracking online threats and sharing information about possible attacks.</p> <p>A senior DHS official told the Guardian this week the department aims to track "narratives known to provoke violence" and platforms that have been linked to threats. The primary goal, the official said, was to warn potential targets when they should enhance security.</p>

In the days leading up to the anniversary of the riot, for example, the agency saw an uptick in activity on platforms tied to white supremacists and neo-Nazis and warned law enforcement partners when appropriate, the official said. This monitoring relies on DHS analysts, not artificial intelligence, and doesn't target "ideologies", the official added, but rather "calls for violence".

The Guardian spoke with Harsha Panduranga, counsel with the liberty and national security program at the Brennan Center for Justice, a not-for-profit organization that has [tracked](#) police and government entities' [online surveillance](#) programs, about the US government's monitoring of social media in the wake of 6 January.

Although DHS [says](#) its online efforts are consistent with privacy protections, civil rights and civil liberties, the expansion of social media monitoring still raised concerns, Panduranga argued. Without proper safeguards, a new [report](#) from the center warns, the expanded social media surveillance could be both ineffective at preventing attacks and harmful to marginalized groups that end up targeted and criminalized by "counter-terrorism" efforts.

The conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Which US government agencies monitor online activity?

Many federal agencies monitor social media, including [DHS](#), the [FBI](#), the [state department](#), the [Drug Enforcement Administration](#) (DEA), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives ([ATF](#)), the [US Postal Service](#), the [Internal Revenue Service](#) (IRS), the [US Marshals Service](#) and the [Social Security Administration](#) (SSA). Our work has primarily focused on DHS, FBI and the state department, which make extensive use of social media for monitoring, targeting and information collection.

Why do these agencies monitor civilians' social media?

The FBI and DHS use social media monitoring to assist with investigations and to detect potential threats. Some of those investigations do not require a showing of criminal activity. For example, FBI agents can open an "assessment" [the lowest-level investigative stage] simply on the basis of preventing crime or terrorism, and without a factual basis. During assessments, FBI agents can search publicly available online information.

Subsequent investigative stages, which require some factual basis, open the door for more invasive surveillance, such as the recording of private online communications. The FBI also awarded a contract to a [firm](#) in December 2020 to scour social media and proactively identify "national security and public safety-related events" not yet reported to law enforcement.

DHS's Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) division says it relies on social media when investigating matters ranging from civil immigration violations to terrorism. Government entities also monitor social media for "situational awareness" to coordinate a response to breaking events.

How broad is this surveillance?

Some DHS divisions, including Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the National Operations Center (NOC) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (Fema), keep tabs on a broad list of websites and keywords being discussed on social media platforms. The agencies' "[privacy impact assessments](#)" suggest there are few limits on the content that can be reviewed. Some assessments list a sweeping range of keywords that are monitored, including "attack", "public health", "power outage", and "jihad".

Immigration authorities also [use](#) social media to screen travelers and immigrants coming into the US and even to monitor them while they live here. People applying for a range of immigration benefits also undergo social media checks to verify information in their application and determine whether they pose a security risk. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Ice) agents can also look at publicly available social media content for a range of investigations, including probing "potential criminal activity" and are authorized to operate undercover online and monitor private communications.

How has this surveillance expanded in the wake of the insurrection?

The main new DHS effort we're aware of is an [initiative](#) monitoring social media to try to identify "narratives" giving rise to violence. DHS says they'll use social media to [pinpoint](#) tips, leads and trends. In September, for example, DHS warned there could be another attack on the Capitol in connection with a Justice for J6 rally. But reports showed that law enforcement personnel [and journalists] [outnumbered](#) the protesters, and there was no indication of violence at the protest. This shows how difficult it is to predict violence relying on social media chatter.

How concerned are you about the potential for civil rights violations in the wake of 6 January?

January 6 seems to be accelerating this emphasis on social media monitoring without sufficient safeguards. And the monitoring to identify "narratives" that may lead to violence is broad enough to sweep in constitutionally protected speech and political discussion on various issues. We've long seen that government monitoring of social media harms people in a number of ways, including wrongly implicating an individual or group in criminal behavior based on their online activity; misinterpreting the meaning of social media activity, sometimes with severe consequences; suppressing people's willingness to talk or connect openly online; and invading individuals' privacy. Authorities have characterized ordinary activity, like wearing a particular sneaker brand or making common hand signs, or social media connections, as evidence of criminal or threatening behavior. This kind of assumption can have high-stakes consequences.

Can you share some specific examples that illustrate these consequences?

In 2020, DHS and the FBI [disseminated](#) reports to law enforcement in Maine warning of potential violence at anti-police brutality demonstrations based on fake social media posts by rightwing provocateurs. Police in Kansas [arrested](#) a teenager in 2020 on suspicion of inciting a riot reportedly based on a mistaken interpretation of his Snapchat post, in which he was actually [denouncing](#) violence. In 2019, DHS officials [barred](#) a Palestinian student arriving to study at Harvard from entering the country allegedly based on the [content](#) of his friends' social media posts. The student said he had neither written nor engaged with the posts, which were critical of the US government. In another case of guilt by association, the NYPD was accused of [wrongly arresting](#) a 19-year-old for attempted murder in 2012 in part because prosecutors [argued](#) his "likes" and photos on social media proved he was a member of a violent gang. That same year, British travelers were [interrogated](#) at Los Angeles international airport and sent back to the UK reportedly due to a border agent's misinterpretation of a joking tweet.

Is social media surveillance effective at identifying legitimate threats?

Broad social media monitoring for threat detection purposes generates reams of useless information, crowding out information on real public safety concerns. Government officials and assessments have repeatedly recognized that this dynamic makes it difficult to distinguish a sliver of genuine threats from the millions of everyday communications that do not warrant law enforcement attention. The former acting chief of DHS's Office of Intelligence and Analysis (I&A) [said](#) last year, "Actual intent to carry out violence can be difficult to discern from the angry, hyperbolic – and constitutionally protected – speech and information commonly found on social media." And a 2021 [internal review](#) of I&A reported that searching "for true threats of violence before they happen is a difficult task filled with ambiguity". The review observed that personnel collected information on a "broad range of general threats" that provided "information of limited value", including "memes, hyperbole, statements on political organizations and other protected first amendment speech". Similar [concerns](#) cropped up with the DHS's pilot programs to use social media to vet refugees.

What groups are most impacted by this kind of surveillance?

Black, brown and Muslim people, as well as activists and dissenters more generally, are especially vulnerable to being falsely labeled as threats based on social media activity. Both the FBI and DHS have monitored Black Lives Matter activists. In 2017, the FBI created a [specious terrorism threat category](#) called "Black Identity Extremism", which can be read to include protests against police violence. This category has been used to rationalize continued surveillance of Black activists, including monitoring of social media activity. In 2020, DHS's Office of Intelligence and Analysis used social media and other tools to target and monitor racial justice protestors in Portland, Oregon, justifying this surveillance by pointing to the threat of vandalism to Confederate monuments. DHS then [disseminated](#) intelligence reports on journalists reporting on this overreach. Muslim, Arab, Middle Eastern and South Asian communities have often been

particular targets of the US government's [discriminatory](#) travel and immigration screening practices, [including](#) social media screening.

How do you think the government should be responding to the intelligence failures of 6 January?

A Senate committee report from last year found that DHS failed to produce a specific warning connected to what would happen on 6 January. An FBI field office had circulated a warning about an online threat with a specific call for violence, but it didn't convince officials to better prepare for the attack. I think one takeaway from these failures is that broadly monitoring social media for scary things people are saying, without any further reason to suspect wrongdoing, tends to flood warning systems with useless information. This makes it harder to pick out what matters and sweeps in thousands of people who haven't or wouldn't do anything violent. Intelligence and law enforcement agencies already have ample and potent tools to investigate far-right violence without relying on indiscriminate social media monitoring, but they are not using these tools as effectively as they should. Instigators of the 6 January riot, for example, were members of groups that were already known to law enforcement. Some of them had previously [participated](#) in organized far-right violence, yet authorities did not bring charges or fully investigate the criminal activities of these organizations. So more indiscriminate surveillance isn't the answer – in fact, such measures are much more likely to harm the very communities that are already at greater risk.

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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	01/10 Taliban: explosion kills 9 children
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/taliban-explosion-kills-children-eastern-afghanistan-82175699
GIST	<p>KABUL, Afghanistan -- An explosion in eastern Afghanistan near the border with Pakistan on Monday killed nine children and wounded four, according to the office of a Taliban-appointed governor.</p> <p>A statement from the governor's office said the blast took place when a cart selling food items struck an old, unexploded mortar shell in the district of Lalopar, in eastern Nagarhar province.</p> <p>No other details were immediately available.</p> <p>The province is the headquarters of Taliban rivals, the Islamic State group, which has staged several attacks targeting Afghanistan's new rulers since the Taliban took over the country in mid-August. However, the IS has operated in Afghanistan since 2014, carrying out dozens of horrific attacks and most often targeting the country's minority Shiite Muslims.</p> <p>Afghanistan is among the countries with the most unexploded land mines and other ordnance from the country's decades of war and conflict. When the ordnance detonates, the victims are often children.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 Colombia ELN rebels claim bombing
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/colombias-leftist-eln-rebels-claim-responsibility-bombing-2022-01-08/
GIST	<p>BOGOTA, Jan 8 (Reuters) - Colombia's leftist rebel National Liberation Army (ELN) on Saturday claimed responsibility for an attack in the country's third-largest city, Cali, that injured more than a dozen police officers.</p> <p>ELN operatives carried out the bombing, which was directed against members of ESMAD, the Colombian national police's feared anti-riot unit, late on Friday, while they were traveling in a vehicle.</p>

"At 9:55 pm on Jan. 7, our units carried out an operation against ESMAD ... in the city of Cali," the ELN said in a statement published on a website belonging to its so-called urban front, adding that its members withdrew uninjured.

The ELN and national police both confirmed that 13 officers were injured in the attack, with police officials saying that some were seriously hurt. No deaths were reported.

The attack drew condemnation from the government and police, with President Ivan Duque decrying it as an attempt by the rebels to influence presidential elections later this year.

"Colombia does not and will not bend to terrorism and our government will never reward terrorists," Duque said in a message on Twitter.

Colombia is offering a reward of 1 billion pesos for information regarding El Rolo, the leader of the ELN's urban front, and 350 million pesos for information concerning those who planned and executed the attack, said General Jorge Vargas, the country's top police official. Together, the two rewards amount to around \$334,000.

The ELN is estimated to have some 2,350 combatants and has fought the government since its 1964 founding by extremist Roman Catholic priests.

Peace talks between the ELN and Colombia's government were put on ice after a rebel bombing killed 22 police cadets in 2019.

The government accuses Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro of harboring ELN rebels and dissident members of the demobilized FARC guerrillas who reject a 2016 peace deal, something the government in Caracas has repeatedly denied.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Violent extremism fears nationwide
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/09/politics/violent-extremism-fears-nationwide/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)A year after the attack on the US Capitol, homeland security and law enforcement officials nationwide are bracing for potential "unprecedented" levels of violence this year as midterm elections kick into gear and the pandemic continues to affect everyday life.</p> <p>The country remains polarized, and many people are angry and frustrated about their individual selves or society's conditions after two years of Covid-19 upheaval, turbulent economic conditions and government restrictions, sources and non-governmental researchers told CNN.</p> <p>Late last month in a string of unrelated incidents, a gunman killed five people in the Denver area, a man was stopped on his way to Washington, DC with weapons and a "hit list," and a New Year's Eve fire at Planned Parenthood facility in Tennessee was declared arson. All these incidents come as officials are already preparing for protests in the nation's capital later this month.</p> <p>Societal divisions coupled with online and media content that is saturated with conspiracy theories and disinformation has led officials to worry that the levels of violence in 2022 could be "unprecedented," a federal law enforcement official said.</p> <p>While much attention focused on the January 6 anniversary, "from a law enforcement perspective, it goes well beyond that," the official said. Another concern is that the volatility will only increase as the election cycle progresses and we get closer to the 2022 midterm elections, they added.</p> <p>Fractures in US society and the spread of misinformation are likely to be exacerbated during the election cycle, the official said, pointing out that public figures, such as those running for office, those who hold elected office and those in the media who comment about these issues will only increase their activities.</p>

"It's not a pleasant forecast," said Peter Simi, an associate professor at Chapman University who studies extremist groups and violence. "I think we see the threats mounting. And really transitioning into what we might call 'an everyday insurgency.'"

One year after the January 6 Capitol riot, far-right extremists still contend the 2020 election was stolen, according to [recent report](#) from SITE Intelligence Group, a non-governmental organization that tracks online extremist activity.

However, these extremist groups have dispersed their focus on various issues, like vaccines, Covid-19 conspiracy theories and Biden administration policies, the report found.

"To be clear, however, the extremist momentum behind January 6 has not diminished -- it has spread in all directions," SITE director Rita Katz said.

That energy has been redirected toward Covid-19 mitigation measures, the migrant crisis at the Southern border, critical race theory and elections, she added.

She also pointed to the upcoming Congressional elections, "which will be centered on the same hot-button topics these violent extremist actors have pivoted towards."

Conspiratorial election and voting fraud theories are a major concern

Ideologies of hate, false information, false narratives are primary sources of the threat landscape in the US today, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas told CNN Wednesday.

"The divisiveness in our country is really fueling it as well," he said. "Words matter. And the words of leaders matter a lot. And that can actually fuel the spread of false information and can drive people to violence."

Conspiracy theories about election fraud, which probably contributed to the breach of the US Capitol last year, continue to resonate among domestic violent extremists, according to a [recent DHS intelligence assessment](#) obtained by CNN.

Mayorkas told reporters this week that the department is "very, very focused on the security and integrity of our election processes," when asked if he was worried about threats connected to the upcoming midterm election cycle.

Over the past year, there has been a dramatic uptick of [threats made against lawmakers](#), with 9,600 in 2021 alone, US Capitol Police Chief Tom Manger said this week. A senior Capitol security official previously [attributed that increase](#) in part to "a more bitter and partisan political environment and citizens for whom the issues that they're angry about are core value and identity issues."

As always, the problem remains sifting through the noise of angry tweeters versus actual threats, the security official said, adding that the "majority" of threats don't "represent a risk of real violence."

DHS intelligence chief John Cohen told [KNX News radio](#) on Wednesday, "What keeps me up at night, and I know is keeping up a number of my colleagues around the country, is not just the anniversary of January 6, but the threat environment as we enter 2022."

Cohen pointed to the polarization of US society, as well as efforts from foreign intelligence services, terrorist organizations and domestic extremist thought leaders who seek to exacerbate social tensions, undermine credibility in the US government and inspire violence by planting and spreading online and media content.

There continues to be a "steady tempo of mass casualty attacks by angry, disaffected people who are inspired by the content that they're consuming online," he said during the interview.

Mass casualty incidents, for example, in [Denver](#), [Atlanta](#), [Indianapolis](#) over the past year all displayed signs of the volatile threats concerning law enforcement today, with some suspects coming to the attention of law enforcement before they carried out attacks.

Last month, a California man was stopped by the Cass County Sheriff's department in Iowa with a "hit list" of people he intended to kill, including Anthony Fauci and Mark Zuckerberg, according to a federal criminal complaint. He had the address of the White House in his GPS and told investigators he would kill President Joe Biden, the complaint said. The suspect's attorney told the court he intends to rely upon an insanity defense.

What's law enforcement doing about it?

Mayorkas said that DHS has increased and improved information sharing with local communities over the past year to help counter the threat from domestic terrorism, as well as added local grant funding and established a new, dedicated domestic terrorism branch.

Many in law enforcement **have** been working to ramp up information sharing over the past year. For example, law enforcement officials nationwide were recently able to see there were [around 200 threats to schools](#) across the country that had proliferated on TikTok, a law enforcement source said.

"Previously, we had no capability to see all those threats at the same time, where they were and what type of threats there were," the source said, pointing to the failures leading up the January 6, 2021.

That said, there is still on the federal government side, a "large disconnect between the many portals that the government manages," the source said.

DHS, FBI and local authorities all manage different systems that are difficult to coordinate, the source added.

Last month, Cohen raised concerns about the ability for law enforcement to manage threats across the US. "We do not yet have, across the United States, a consistent level of capability that is designed to enable threat assessment and threat management activities at the local level," Cohen said during a George Washington University forum.

Mayorkas agreed last week, saying, "We are in fact, seeing an uneven level of capabilities in local communities."

Neither official mentioned specific communities, but the secretary said the unevenness underscores the importance of information sharing and intelligence sharing among law enforcement and homeland security officials.

The suspect in the recent metro Denver shooting spree, for instance, was investigated by Denver police in 2020 and early 2021 but charges were never filed. The gunman -- identified as Lyndon James McLeod, 47, foreshadowed the rampage in a series of books he wrote under a pseudonym, and he used the names of actual victims in his writings, [CNN reported](#).

"This individual was on the radar of law enforcement," Denver Police Chief Paul Pazen previously said without elaborating.

Five people were killed in the shootings and several were wounded, including a policewoman.

Without providing specifics, Mayorkas said that in the last several weeks, DHS has seen the benefits of information sharing, in a situation "where a particular community was not necessarily as developed in its apparatus, or evolved as others, but nevertheless, through the information we imparted to it, it was able to identify a potential threat before that threat materialized and inform us."

'Asleep at the wheel'

	<p>A year after the January 6 Capitol riot, the extremism landscape is "all over the map," Seamus Hughes, deputy director of the Program on Extremism at George Washington University, told CNN.</p> <p>There are traditional White supremacists, anti-government groups and accelerationists, as well as a "significant group of folks" that are interested in ISIS and Al Qaeda, he said. The objective of accelerationism is to foment divisiveness and polarization that will induce the collapse of the existing order and spark a civil war, according to the Council on Foreign Relations, which recently wrote about the perils of the movement.</p> <p>The lack of large-scale events similar to the January 6 riot over the past year, is a reflection of a fracturing movement combined with the efforts of law enforcement, according to Hughes.</p> <p>Looking ahead to the election season, Hughes pointed out that while there has been a rise in threats against election officials and public officials, several elections have safely taken place since last January.</p> <p>When it comes to far-right extremism, Simi, the Chapman University professor, told CNN, "We've been asleep at the wheel for a long time," in part making it difficult for the public to understand the multiple threats facing the US.</p> <p>"Part of that is because it's an insider threat. It's easier to point to something from the outside, those that are attacking us from outside," he said, referencing the terrorism of 9/11.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Resettled Gitmo detainees no legal status
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/09/guantanamo-resettled-no-legal-status
GIST	<p>About 30% of former Guantánamo detainees who were resettled in third countries have not been granted legal status, according to new analysis shared exclusively with the Guardian, leaving them vulnerable to deportation and restricting their ability to rebuild their lives.</p> <p>Of the hundreds of men released from Guantánamo since the prison first opened 20 years ago, about 150 were sent to third countries in bilateral agreements brokered by the US, because their home countries were considered dangerous to return to.</p> <p>Publicly, the US committed to transferring them in a humane way that would ensure rehabilitation after years of incarceration – and, in many cases, torture – without charge. But many remain in legal limbo, unable to work or reunite with their families, and have been subject to years of detention. Others have been forcibly returned to dangerous conditions.</p> <p>The new data was produced by the human rights organization Reprieve, which assists former detainees, and illustrates how the lawlessness that has marked the prison from the beginning can follow men years after their release. The analysis indicates that approximately 45 men have not been given residency documents upon resettlement.</p> <p>Ravil Mingazov was held at Guantánamo for more than 14 years before being transferred to the United Arab Emirates on the last day of the Obama administration. A Muslim Tatar from Russia who had been harassed by authorities because of his religion, he feared returning home, where UN human rights experts warned he could face torture. He was assured he would live freely in the UAE after a short stint in a rehabilitation facility. Instead, he has been held in solitary confinement and severely mistreated, according to his family and attorneys.</p> <p>His 23-year-old son, Yusuf Mingazov, spoke to the Guardian from his home in London. “I’m not saying that Guantánamo is a good place. It’s one of the worst places in the world, one of the worst prisons. But comparing to UAE right now, it’s a nice place.”</p> <p>Last year, fears of forced repatriation mounted after Russian authorities visited Ravil’s mother in Tatarstan to produce travel documents. Monitored phone calls to relatives ground to a halt. A UN opinion has</p>

likened Mingazov's case to incommunicado detention and enforced disappearance, holding both the US and the UAE responsible. A state department spokesperson said that concerns regarding the case had been raised with the UAE government.

Martina Burtscher, a caseworker with Reprieve, said that addressing the needs of former detainees became much harder when the Trump administration eliminated a state department office dedicated to closing Guantánamo. That office had been led by a special envoy charged with finding solutions for the men who remained and monitoring the conditions of those resettled.

Without the office, there was no way to press host governments, who now "had a free hand" to do what they wanted with the men, said Burtscher. "Who do you call in the state department to try to ensure that there is a follow-up? You can go to the US embassy in the host country, which I tried to do in several locations. The answers were largely the same: 'It's not our problem any more. The men are now at the [mercy] of their host countries, and we are sure that their human rights are being met.'"

For many former detainees, that was not the case. The UAE has deported 22 other men to their home countries, Yemen and Afghanistan. One of the Yemeni men is [being held](#) by a militia group; one of the Afghan men died from "torture, mistreatment and medical neglect both at Guantánamo and in the UAE", according to a [UN report](#). In 2018, Senegal forcibly repatriated two men to Libya, where they were detained by militia. They have since been released but remain "vulnerable to re-detention", according to Reprieve.

Other ex-detainees may be nominally free in host countries, but without documentation, they often can't work, travel or see their families. [Mansoor Adayfi](#), a Yemeni man sent to Serbia in 2016, has complained of persistent surveillance and other restrictions, [calling post-detention life](#) "Guantánamo 2.0".

The state department spokesperson said that the government registers its concerns with host countries when it is not clear ex-detainees are being treated humanely.

The Biden administration has not re-established the special envoy role for closing Guantánamo. Only [one person](#) has so far been released under Biden, to his native Morocco, and 13 detainees are eligible for transfer.

Ambassador Daniel Fried, the special envoy during Obama's first term, said monitoring the progress of resettled detainees was a central part of the job. "We knew the status of every third-country transfer. I knew the one who got married and where he worked and who his wife was," he said.

"There are some problems of Guantánamo that will never go away," Fried continued. "The way you deal with that is to step up and make sure that the people that were there – if you found them eligible for transfer – are given the support they need."

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HEADLINE	01/10 Lithuania pays 'forever prisoner' \$113,500
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/10/lithuania-pays-guantanamo-forever-prisoner-abu-zubaydah-100000-cia-torture
GIST	<p>Lithuania has paid more than \$110,000 to Abu Zubaydah, the Guantánamo detainee known as the "forever prisoner", in compensation for having allowed the CIA to hold him at a secret site outside Vilnius where he was subjected to forms of torture.</p> <p>The €100,000 (\$113,500) payment comes more than three years after the European Court of Human Rights ordered the Lithuanian government to pay compensation for violating European laws banning the use of torture.</p> <p>It marks a significant shift in the treatment of Zubaydah, who has been detained by the US without charge for more than 20 years.</p>

Zubaydah was captured in Pakistan six months after 9/11. The [CIA](#) and lawyers for the Bush administration attempted to justify his torture by claiming he was a very senior figure in al-Qaida. It emerged that he was not a member of the organisation and he has never been charged with involvement in 9/11.

For much of the time since his arrest, Zubaydah has been held incommunicado, at the insistence of the CIA as part of its efforts to prevent details of his torture from becoming public.

Lawyers for Zubaydah believe it is highly unlikely that [Lithuania](#) would have made the compensation payment without approval from Washington.

“The situation is a lot less incommunicado when you pay €100,000 to someone and the whole world knows about it,” Mark Denbeaux, one of Zubaydah’s legal team based in the US, told the Guardian.

“This move is consistent with the idea that the US is softening its position on the detention of the forever prisoners. The US could clearly have kept Lithuania from handing over this money and the question is, why didn’t they?”

News of the Lithuanian payment comes just days before the 20th anniversary of the military prison at Guantánamo, which [received its first detainees](#) on 11 January 2002. In recent months there have been other signs of a shifting attitude towards Zubaydah and the torture that was inflicted upon him by CIA agents and contractors.

In October, the US supreme court [heard arguments](#) in a case in which the US government is seeking to block two CIA contractors from testifying in Poland about torture Zubaydah suffered in 2002 and 2003 at a secret or “black” site in that country. In the course of the hearing, several of the justices, including conservatives, broke a legal taboo by [openly using](#) the word “torture”.

In Zubaydah’s case against Lithuania, which was led on the European side by his lawyer Helen Duffy, the European Court of Human Rights [heard](#) that Zubaydah was held at a CIA black site in that country from February 2005 to March 2006. The site, codenamed Violet, was on the outskirts of Vilnius.

The most brutal forms of torture endured by Zubaydah occurred in 2002 when he was held at a CIA black site in Thailand. An entire program of torture, euphemistically referred to by the CIA as “enhanced interrogation techniques”, was devised for the prisoner by two psychologists under contract to the agency.

Zubaydah was waterboarded – a type of controlled drowning – at least 83 times in August 2002, as well as being placed in a coffin-sized box for days on end.

European judges heard that Zubaydah was unlikely to have suffered from the harshest forms of torture while in Lithuania. But he was subjected to techniques that still amounted to torture, lawyers argued, including sensory and sleep deprivation, solitary confinement, loud noise and harsh light.

The money transferred by Lithuania is now in a bank account. Zubaydah is unable to receive the sum given his detention in Guantánamo and because his assets have been frozen by the US treasury.

A similar freezing of his assets by the United Nations security council was reversed two years ago, after a petition by his lawyers.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Lone actor attack risk: ‘freedom’ protesters
SOURCE	https://www.smh.com.au/national/extremism-experts-warn-of-lone-actor-attack-risk-among-freedom-protesters-20220104-p59lqe.html

Terrorism experts say there is a serious risk that volatile individuals in the “freedom” movement will carry out lone attacks as they become radicalised by talk of executions, taking up arms and martyrdom.

Leading terrorism expert Greg Barton said he was most concerned about the potential for a vulnerable individual to be inspired by extreme rhetoric promoted by influencers within the anti-vaccination movement.

“My immediate worry is that an individual may decide to go and do something by themselves and it’s quite likely [to be] somebody who has got other issues going on in their life,” he said.

The movement, responsible for large anti-lockdown protests in 2020 and 2021, has become increasingly fragmented and searching for purpose since the lockdowns lifted, according to Institute for Strategic Dialogue intelligence analyst Elise Thomas.

“As people see that momentum start to ebb away, they start to switch from the sense that ‘we are winning’, to ‘we are losing’ ... they feel a need to escalate to some sort of really radical action,” she said.

A central figure in the movement and founder of activist group Reignite Democracy Australia, Monica Smit, asked followers what they were “willing to die for” in [a social media post](#) in November. She recently described as “heroic” an incident in which a woman attempted to self-immolate in Melbourne, reportedly wearing a sign protesting against vaccine mandates.

“From what it looks like to me, she was willing to give up her life for this. And that in itself, no matter what the backstory is, that in itself is something heroic,” Ms Smit said [in a video](#) posted for her more than 74,000 followers on her Telegram channel.

“I’m not saying what she did is heroic, I feel terrible for what she did. And I don’t know how she is mentally. And I don’t know how she is physically after what happened. But this is just a sign of how desperate we are.”

Ms Smit interrupted a follower during a Q&A video conference on December 23 who suggested that she and others in the Snowy Mountains were planning to arm themselves out of frustration that their protest efforts had come to nothing.

“It’s got to the stage where we’re getting arms – archery, gun licences,” the woman said tearfully before Ms Smit cut her off, saying: “Stop, this is not the right forum to talk about that stuff, we can talk about that separately.”

Ms Smit later defended the exchange, telling *The Sunday Age* her followers were arming themselves to hunt for food due to concerns about [shortages of a diesel additive which has threatened to halt the trucking industry](#) and supply chains.

There was no explicit discussion of hunting or shortages in the two-hour session in which followers asked their leader for advice about being ostracised from their families, being fired from their workplaces over refusing to take a COVID-19 vaccine and pulling their children out of school to avoid them being vaccinated.

The Sunday Age unearthed other examples of content being shared in “freedom” groups urging the use of violence and weapons.

“People actually still think that we can solve this with the same three failed methods that people have been using for the last 10 years: petitions, voting, peaceful protests. None of them work – neither do your [court cases.](#)” one former white supremacist group leader said in a video days after the Old Parliament House fire, which was instigated last month by [anti-vaccine, “sovereign citizen” activists.](#)

“No matter how violent it has to be – smashing down the doors, pulling these people out of their offices and, you know, making sure their feet dangle off the ground with a little something around their neck.”

Extreme rhetoric about hanging executions has been normalised in the movement by conspiracy theorist [Riccardo Bosi](#), a former special forces soldier who presents himself as leader of the “AustraliaOne Party”, an outfit that is not registered as a political party.

Mr Bosi, who appears at “freedom” rallies and whose organisation has tens of thousands of social media followers, said in a December interview his organisation would execute notable media personalities such as Alan Jones, Peta Credlin, Paul Murray and ABC chair Ita Buttrose for their apparent silence on a “vaccine genocide”.

Months on from the introduction of vaccine mandates for essential workers, large numbers of isolated Australians have either left their jobs or been sacked for refusing to get vaccinated and have just spent their first Christmas [estranged from loved ones because of their views](#).

The fire last month at Old Parliament House should serve as a “warning shot” of the threat posed by a small group of radicalised individuals – especially months out from a federal election, according to Deakin University extremism researcher Josh Roose.

“It’s effectively an indicator of the potential of these groups for violence,” he said.

Dr Roose said the movement was a loose alliance, including militant wellness groups, anti-vax groups, the Christian Right, Evangelicals and other Orthodox religious groups, sovereign citizens and [Qanon conspiracy theorists](#).

“The underpinning distrust in science and government hasn’t gone away,” he said. “And it’s been actively stoked very cynically by populist politicians.

“[If] it’s not taken seriously and investigated ... then we risk being well behind the eight-ball.”

The threat of violence during the pandemic has been [previously associated with far-right, neo-Nazi personalities](#) who are attempting to recruit on the fringes of the movement, but Professor Barton said rhetoric just as concerning was coming from activists with larger followings and more mainstream appeal.

Ms Smit’s organisation has [promised to back Craig Kelly and Clive Palmer’s United Australia Party at the upcoming federal election](#), and her partner, Morgan Jonas, is running as a candidate for the party in Health Minister Greg Hunt’s seat of Flinders.

Professor Barton said Ms Smit’s “quasi-religious language” was extremely dangerous.

“She’s playing with fire because somebody like [the man responsible [for Sydney’s Lindt Cafe siege](#)] will respond to that language and say, ‘okay, I’m going to be that person’,” Professor Barton said.

“That’s why people are starting to think of ways to support themselves with food and community,” she said.

Ms Smit, who has propagated a theory to her followers that they may eventually be placed in “concentration camps” for the unvaccinated, assured them in the December video conference that their commitment to staying unvaccinated was a trial from God.

“God has given us these trials, because he wants us to stand up, he wants us to be better,” she said.

“You can be in the quarantine camp with your head held high knowing that you did your best.”

Ms Smit told *The Sunday Age* that her organisation “has and never will advocate for violence”.

	<p>“In fact, we’ve openly discouraged it and always advocate for peaceful campaigning only,” she said.</p> <p>“Nothing I’ve ever said could be misinterpreted to be calling for any type of violence whatsoever. I’m a Christian and we never solve things with violence, we use our words and negotiation.”</p> <p>Mr Bosi did not respond to a request from <i>The Sunday Age</i> to explain his violent rhetoric.</p> <p>A spokesperson for national security agency ASIO said it believed the threat posed by “a subset of these minority groups who wish to escalate protest to violence” would “not diminish any time soon – and may well grow”.</p> <p>“The online environment is a force multiplier for extremism; fertile ground for sharing ideology and spreading propaganda,” they said.</p> <p>“We are seeing a growing number of individuals and groups that don’t fit on the left–right spectrum at all,” the spokesperson said.</p> <p>“Instead, they’re motivated by a fear of societal collapse or a specific social or economic grievance or conspiracy.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Taliban arrest popular Afghan professor
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-arrests-media-kabul-taliban-789561b1c1181bbd9af89d7f22fa8579
GIST	<p>KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Taliban have arrested a popular university professor and outspoken critic of successive Afghan governments, including the new rulers in Kabul, the group’s spokesman said Sunday.</p> <p>Zabihullah Mujahid said in a tweet that professor Faizuallah Jalal was being held by the Taliban’s intelligence arm. The group accused the professor of “nonsense remarks on social media, which were provoking people against the government and playing with people’s dignity.”</p> <p>The Taliban seized control of Afghanistan last August ahead of America’s chaotic Aug. 31 departure after nearly 20 years of war. The Islamic militant guerrillas-turned-rulers previously held power from 1996-2001.</p> <p>In a tweet early Sunday, Jalal’s daughter Hasina Jalal pleaded for her father’s release. “As I confirm the disturbing news. I ask for the immediate release of my father Professor Faizuallah Jalal,” she tweeted</p> <p>Afghanistan faces a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions, with the United Nations warning that 90% of the country’s 38 million people are in dire need. The arrest of a prominent rights activist was certain to complicate humanitarian aid efforts.</p> <p>It also reinforced fears that the Taliban are imposing the same harsh and repressive rule as heir last stint in power before they were ousted by a U.S.-led coalition for harboring al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden.</p> <p>TOLO TV, Afghanistan’s largest station on which Faizuallah Jalal was a frequent commentator, tweeted that Jalal was arrested “reportedly for making allegations against government departments, a security source said.”</p> <p>There was no official response from the government to queries about Jalal’s arrest.</p> <p>Jalal is the husband of one of the country’s first female presidential candidates, Masooda Jalal, who ran against former President Hamid Karzai in 2004.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Nigeria: 'bandit' militants kill 200 villagers
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/09/hundreds-villagers-killed-by-bandits-in-north-west-nigeria
GIST	<p>At least 200 people are believed to have been killed in villages in the north-western Nigerian state of Zamfara during deadly reprisal attacks by armed bandits.</p> <p>Residents returned to the villages on Saturday after the military organised mass burials. The state government said 58 people had been killed during the attacks.</p> <p>Ummaru Makeri, a resident who lost his wife and three children during the attack, said around 154 people had been buried, including several vigilantes. Residents said the total death toll was at least 200.</p> <p>Balarabe Alhaji, a community leader in one of the affected villages, said: "We buried a total of 143 people killed by the bandits in the attacks."</p> <p>Babandi Hamidu, a resident of Kurfa Danya village, said the militants were shooting "anyone on sight". "More than 140 people were buried across the 10 villages and the search for more bodies is ongoing because many people are unaccounted for," Hamidu said.</p> <p>On Friday it was reported that more than 100 people were killed by suspected "bandit" militants in the north of the country. Gunmen on motorbikes arrived in large numbers in as many as nine communities between Tuesday and Thursday night, opening fire on residents and burning homes.</p> <p>The military said it had conducted air strikes in the early hours of Monday on targets in the Gusami forest and west Tsamre village in Zamfara state, killing more than 100 militants, including two of their leaders. Kabir Adamu, a security analyst with Abuja-based Beacon Consulting Nigeria, told AFP this week's raids could be in response to military operations.</p> <p>"Angered by this, and perhaps by the fact that that they were facing certain death, [they] decided to move to other locations and in the course of this they seem to be conducting these attacks," Adamu said.</p> <p>There have been a series of attacks in north-west Nigeria, which has seen a sharp rise in mass abductions and other violent crimes since late 2020 as the government struggles to maintain law and order.</p> <p>In a separate incident, 30 students abducted from their college in the north-western Nigerian state of Kebbi were freed on Saturday, a spokesman for the Kebbi governor said, without providing details.</p> <p>The president, Muhammadu Buhari, said in a statement on Saturday the military had acquired more equipment to track down and eliminate criminal gangs who have been subjecting people to a reign of terror, including through the illegal imposition of taxes on communities under siege.</p> <p>"The latest attacks on innocent people by the bandits is an act of desperation by mass murderers, now under relentless pressure from our military forces," Buhari said.</p> <p>On Wednesday, the Nigerian government officially labelled bandits as terrorists, to bring tougher sanctions against convicted gunmen, their informants and supporters.</p> <p>Buhari told Nigerian TV this week: "We labelled them terrorists ... we are going to deal with them as such."</p>
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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	01/10 Scientists: 2021 Earth's 5 th hottest year
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SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/10/climate/2021-hottest-year.html
GIST	<p>Last year was Earth’s fifth hottest on record, European scientists announced on Monday. But the fact that the worldwide average temperature didn’t beat the record is hardly reason to stop worrying about global warming’s grip on the planet, they said.</p> <p>Not when both the United States and Europe had their warmest summers on the books. Not when higher temperatures around the Arctic caused it to rain for the first time at the Greenland ice sheet’s normally frigid summit.</p> <p>And certainly not when the seven hottest years ever recorded were, by a clear margin, the past seven.</p> <p>The events of 2021 “are a stark reminder of the need to change our ways, take decisive and effective steps toward a sustainable society and work toward reducing net carbon emissions,” said Carlo Buontempo, director of the Copernicus Climate Change Service, the European Union program that conducted the analysis made public on Monday.</p> <p>The mean temperature globally last year was 1.1 to 1.2 degrees Celsius (2 to 2.2 degrees Fahrenheit) higher than they were before industrialization led humans to begin pumping large quantities of carbon dioxide into the air.</p> <p>The year was fifth warmest by a slight margin over 2015 and 2018, by Copernicus’s ranking. The hottest years on record are 2016 and 2020, in a virtual tie.</p> <p>The steady warming corresponds with the scientific consensus that increasing levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere are causing long-lasting changes in the global climate. Copernicus said its preliminary analysis of satellite measurements had found that concentrations of heat-trapping gases continued to rise last year, helped by 1,850 megatons of carbon emissions from wildfires worldwide.</p> <p>One big reason for 2021’s lower mean temperature was the presence during the early part of the year of La Niña conditions, a recurring climate pattern characterized by lower surface temperatures in the Pacific Ocean. (La Niña has returned in recent months, which could presage a drier winter in the Southern United States but wetter conditions in the Pacific Northwest.)</p> <p>Those effects were offset in the 2021 average, however, by higher temperatures in many parts of the world between June and October, Copernicus said.</p> <p>“When we think about climate change, it’s not just a single progression, year after year after year being the warmest,” said Robert Rohde, the lead scientist at Berkeley Earth, an independent environmental research group.</p> <p>“The preponderance of evidence — which comes from looking at ocean temperatures, land temperatures, upper atmospheric temperatures, glaciers melting, sea ice changes — are telling us a coherent story about changes in the earth system which points to warming overall,” Dr. Rohde said. “Slight variations up or down, a year or two at a time, don’t change that picture.”</p> <p>Berkeley Earth is expected to issue its own analysis of 2021 temperatures this month, as are two U.S. government agencies: NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.</p> <p>Unlike those groups, Copernicus uses a method called re-analysis, which produces a portrait of global weather conditions using a computer model that fills in the gaps between temperature measurements. Even so, the different groups’ conclusions usually line up quite closely.</p> <p>As ever, higher average temperatures were not observed uniformly across the planet last year. Most of Australia and parts of Antarctica experienced below-normal temperatures in 2021, as did areas in western Siberia.</p>

	<p>Europe's summer last year was the warmest on record, though 2010 and 2018 were not far behind, according to Copernicus. Severe rainfall and flooding caused destruction and death in Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Heat and dryness set the stage for wildfires that ravaged Greece and other places around the Mediterranean.</p> <p>The western side of North America experienced off-the-charts heat, drought and wildfires last summer. Canada's maximum temperature record was broken in June when the mercury in a small town in British Columbia hit 121.3 degrees Fahrenheit, or 49.6 Celsius.</p> <p>Scientists have concluded that the Pacific Coast heat wave would have been practically impossible in a world without human-induced warming. The question is whether the event fits into the present meteorological understanding, even if it is without precedent, or is a sign that the climate is changing in ways that scientists do not fully grasp.</p> <p>"From where I sit right now, I would tend to think that this was probably still a very rare event, even in the modern climate," Dr. Rohde said. "But there's a degree of 'wait and see' involved."</p> <p>If the planet does not experience heat events of similar intensity in the coming decades, scientists are likely to look back and regard 2021 as an extreme fluke, he said. "If we do, it's telling us that something is changed in a more fundamental way."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 NASA completes telescope deployment
SOURCE	https://arstechnica.com/science/2022/01/remarkably-nasa-has-completed-deployment-of-the-webb-space-telescope/
GIST	<p>For much of the world, Saturday was just another day of problems and perils. The omicron-fueled pandemic raged around the globe. New York emerged from its first snowstorm of the season. Turmoil continued in Kazakhstan and elsewhere.</p> <p>But in space—in <i>space</i>—Saturday saw a great triumph.</p> <p>After a quarter century of effort by tens of thousands of people, more than \$10 billion in taxpayer funding, and some 350 deployment mechanisms that had to go just so, the James Webb Space Telescope fully unfurled its wings. The massive spacecraft completed its final deployments and, by God, the process went smoothly.</p> <p>Thanks to NASA and space agencies in Europe and Canada, the world has a brilliant new space telescope that will allow humanity to see far further back into the depths of galactic time than ever before. The telescope might even identify the first truly Earth-like worlds around other stars.</p> <p>I dare say that 99 percent of the world will not know or realize or care to understand the amount of work and engineering and paperwork that went into building, launching, and deploying the James Webb Space Telescope. But those of us who know, <i>we know</i>. And we are in awe.</p> <p>In something of an understatement after full deployment, NASA's chief of science, Thomas Zurbuchen, said, "This is an amazing milestone."</p> <p>Scientists have always been keen on seeing further back into the early universe, and serious planning for a successor to the Hubble Space Telescope began in the 1990s. To look into the past, they would need a dark, cold environment far from Earth. This is because collecting light from the faintest, most distant objects in the universe requires not just a very large mirror, but also no background interference.</p> <p>To do this, scientists planned to build a telescope that would make observations in the infrared part of the spectrum, where wavelengths are just a little bit longer than red light. This portion of the spectrum is good</p>

for detecting heat emissions and because such wavelengths are long enough that there's less chance they will be deflected by interstellar dust.

-199° Celsius

Such a telescope would need to be very cold, however, which is how scientists came to devise a tennis-court sized heat shield to block light and heat from the Sun from affecting the Webb telescope. But because no rocket has a superlarge fairing, this heat shield and telescope would necessarily need to be folded like origami to fit within the protective cocoon atop a rocket. Nothing like that had ever been tried before. Building this heat shield, testing it, and ensuring it could be deployed in space required the better part of two decades.

Therefore, while the launch of the Webb telescope on Christmas Day two weeks ago was momentous, it wasn't the end of Webb's journey from concept to science operations. As part of the deployment process, there were 344 actions where a single-point failure could scuttle the telescope. This is a remarkable number of instances without a redundant capability, which is why many of the scientists and engineers I have spoken with in recent years felt that Webb had a pretty good chance of failing once in space.

But now that ultracomplex heat shield is working. The temperature on the Sun-facing side of the telescope is 55° Celsius, or a very, very, very hot day in the Sahara desert. And already, the science instruments on the back side of the sunshield have cooled to -199° Celsius, a temperature at which nitrogen is a liquid. They will yet cool further.

Work remains, of course. [Webb still must traverse](#) about 370,000 km to reach an orbit around a stable Lagrange point, L2. Scientists and engineers must check out and align the 18 primary mirror segments. Scientific instruments must be calibrated. But all of this work is routine when it comes to science spacecraft (or as routine as anything in space can be). There are risks, to be sure, but these are mostly known risks.

We can therefore be reasonably confident now that Webb will, in fact, begin to make science observations this summer. We should, truly, be in awe.

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HEADLINE	01/08 Far-right extremists shift to local power
SOURCE	https://www.adn.com/nation-world/2022/01/08/a-rural-washington-school-board-race-shows-how-far-right-extremists-are-shifting-to-local-power/
GIST	<p>EATONVILLE, Wash. - On the morning she met her opponent for coffee, Sarah Cole walked in with a front-runner's confidence.</p> <p>To Cole, the school board seat in this rural red district about an hour outside of Seattle was all but hers. Educators and community leaders had endorsed her. She had name recognition from years in the Parent Teacher Association. And, besides, she was running against Ashley Sova, a home-schooling, anti-masking member of the far-right Three Percent movement.</p> <p>"I kind of thought I had it in the bag," Cole recalled.</p> <p>Their coffee date that October day, as recounted by both women, was an exercise in gritted-teeth civility. Cole asked about the Three Percent logo tattooed on Sova's neck in red, white and blue bullets. Sova tried to corner Cole on critical race theory. At the end, they took a photo and promised to work together no matter who was elected, each privately expecting Cole to win.</p> <p>In December, however, it was Sova who was sworn in, the second Three Percenter on the five-person Eatonville School Board. Three Percenter ideology, part of the self-styled militia movement, promotes conspiratorial views about government overreach and imagines "patriotic" Americans revolting against perceived violations of the Constitution.</p>

Presented as “defending liberty,” extremism analysts say, those far-right views are spreading in conservative places like Eatonville, where the school board race spiraled into a fight over mask mandates and how race is taught in school. Cole lost by more than 200 votes.

“The race was basically sabotaged by the national narrative,” Cole said. She sounded incredulous that parents felt best represented by a Three Percenter whose kids aren’t even in public school: “I don’t even know how to explain it except to say, in the face of the facts, they still chose to run with fears.”

What happened in Eatonville, according to extremism trackers, is bigger than a small-town upset. In recent years, far-right groups have been moving away from national organizing to focus on building grass-roots support, harnessing conservative outrage to influence school boards and other local offices. That effort was stepped up after the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol left much of the militant right under federal scrutiny and in operational disarray.

Eatonville is among several rural, conservative parts of the West where members of self-styled militias are making inroads through what researchers call a mix of opportunism and intimidation. Once-fringe views about government “tyranny” now match the mainstream conservative discourse on vaccine and mask mandates, softening the public image of movements linked to political violence.

“If you’re going to make a change, you don’t do it by storming the Capitol. You make change by using the process that you’ve been given and starting at the bottom,” said Matt Marshall, founder of the Washington Three Percent and a member of the Eatonville School Board.

Two years ago, watchdog groups warned that Marshall’s election represented the dangerous creep of anti-government extremism. Today, the Washington Three Percent claims members in dozens of official posts throughout the state, including a mayor, a county commissioner and at least five school board seats. Sova, an officer with the group, was among four women members who ran in local races this cycle. Three won.

Most Washington Three Percenters in public roles keep the affiliation quiet for fear of backlash from anti-fascist activists or employers. Not Sova. She openly embraces the ideology, which comes from the debunked notion that only 3% of colonists rose up in the American Revolution. Her membership is evident in the ink on her neck and in photos online where she makes the movement’s three-finger hand gesture.

When asked about Sova’s Three Percent ties, a spokesperson for Eatonville schools said the district doesn’t comment on the “personal lives” of board members.

Sova said her involvement is about survivalist “prepping,” not overthrowing the government.

“I’m not what people assume that I am,” Sova said. “I love the fact that I’m different, and maybe that makes me scary to some, but I don’t know, I’m not this gun-toting, right-wing extremist that they all think I am.”

Sova was reminded that she was, quite literally, toting a gun at that moment, with a pistol strapped to her hip. She laughed.

“But I’m not waving it around, you know what I mean,” she said. “This is a tool. It is to be an equalizer in any bad situation. I’m not here to intimidate people.”

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‘Democracy is on fire’

Sova isn’t wrong when she argues that her “extreme” views are simply representative of local politics, and that’s the concern, according to researchers who track the mainstreaming of far-right ideologies. Conservatives have moved so far right, researchers say, that there’s now little daylight between Sova’s positions and those of most elected Republican leaders or pundits on Fox News shows.

Kate Bitz of the Western States Center, a regional anti-extremism watchdog, said the school board push is an extension of an “inside/outside” tactic of armed groups fielding candidates for legitimate posts while simultaneously agitating for political violence. The attention from the Capitol riot forced groups to shelve national work and launder their image at the grass-roots level, she said.

“They are hoping that they can advance the inside part of the inside/outside game without having to take on the cost of the intimidation, the harassment, the undermining of democracy that they are also engaging in,” Bitz said.

The extremist push into local institutions hasn’t gone unchallenged, but opposition is risky. David Neiwert, a veteran documentarian of the militant right, detailed several recent incidents where “patriot” groups, Proud Boys and white supremacists reportedly used force or intimidation at public events.

In Post Falls, Idaho, self-styled militia members showed up to the city library to “harass students who turned out for an LGBTQ-friendly program,” the report said. In Washougal, Wash., a self-proclaimed Proud Boy showed up to a school board meeting to harangue members and residents about their “cowardice” on mask mandates and critical race theory. He drew applause and cheers.

Rural activists who stand up to far-right forces often do so alone.

“Daily life has become filled with foreboding, intimidation, threats, and ugliness,” Neiwert wrote in the liberal Daily Kos.

That climate is why one liberal Eatonville couple - supporters of school board candidate Cole - requested anonymity to freely describe changes in their community that make them uneasy. They worried that their decision not to use their names might be judged by outsiders who don’t understand the subtle pressures of living among members of a far-right group.

“Someone looking at it would think, ‘Idiots, stand up for something. For Chrissake, democracy is on fire, kick some ass,’” the husband said. “But it’s those little social, nuanced things where you see Matt Marshall with a crown of bullets, in his boogaloo boys shirt, stomping around Olympia. And it does make you stop and think.”

During the Trump era, the couple said, they observed local views drifting further to the right, taking on militant overtones. The woods around their house now crackle with gunfire, sometimes thousands of rounds on the weekends, seemingly more than just casual target practice. They noticed when a neighbor put up a Trump sign the day after the Jan. 6 attack. Another neighbor spotted their Biden sign and asked when they’d become “leftists.”

The couple consider themselves “run-of-the-mill” Democrats, the husband said, but suddenly they’d been cast as a radical enemy.

“We are the minority. We clearly understand that we’re the minority,” he said. “But there was a space.”

Now, they said, that space is shrinking. One fall evening before the 2020 election, a car rolled by as they were sitting on their front porch. The driver saw their Biden sign, backed up and rolled down the window to yell, “Get the f--- out of here!”

“I was like, are you kidding me? At my home?” the husband said. “I brought the .38 and sat it out there and then I thought, ‘No, don’t do that.’”

“We felt so threatened because we’ve lived here for so long,” the wife said, tearing up. “We built our own house our own selves here. We raised our kids here.”

Infuriated, the wife plunged back into her research, using Google and social media to explore the local reach of far-right activity. She mapped out connections and learned how extremists organized by latching

onto Stop the Steal and anti-mask events. She started to understand “just how many Three Percenters we have around us.”

When Sova ran for school board, the couple said, they saw a way to quietly push back. They donated to their friend Cole’s campaign and helped to boost her on social media.

Drawing from her research, the wife put together a 24-page dossier, compiled from public information, that documents Sova’s ties to the Washington Three Percent and how she was supported by influential right-wing figures and a sympathetic PAC. It’s a forensic, time-stamped look at how one local race was influenced by a simultaneous right-wing showdown with state leaders over vaccine mandates.

Before sharing it with The Washington Post, the couple hadn’t released the information. They said they worried about retaliation if it were traced to them. Plus, it dawned on them that it might backfire if voters knew more about Sova’s Three Percenter bona fides.

“We think it would’ve helped her,” the wife said with a sigh. “That’s what the concern was.”

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An accidental politician

Two hours before she was to be sworn in at her first school board meeting, Sova was in mud-spattered boots feeding farm animals on her family’s 12-acre compound, which is nestled in the woods behind a tall metal gate with signs warning that trespassers would be shot.

Sova said she would change her shoes and try not to cuss, but that otherwise, she intended to be 100% herself on the board.

“I’m a conservative. I’m a Republican. I’m not anti-government, but I believe the government needs to work for the people,” Sova said. “That, I think, has gone away.”

Sova is an accidental politician, recruited as a last-minute replacement when another candidate, a local right-wing activist, realized that his address was just outside the district. She said she never previously sought any public role - “Oh sweet baby Jesus, no!” - and didn’t think she had much of a chance at winning.

Sova saw running mainly as a way to register conservative discontent on the issues of the moment: mask mandates, diversity and inclusion efforts, sex education lessons. Before filing, Sova said, she had family check-ins with her husband, a Slovakian immigrant whose family’s escape from communist rule influenced her politics, and their three children, ages 16, 15 and 10. The kids have been home-schooled since 2014.

“It was a big decision for us,” Sova said of entering the race. “I knew right now, in this era, that I was going to get a lot of crap.”

And she did, mostly related to her Three Percenter activity, which Sova brushes off as being “in the country doing country things.” She said she doesn’t take part in protests at the state capitol. She joined because she shares the group’s “constitutionalist” stances and wanted to learn survival skills like canning and butchering.

“We have bonfires over here where the music is loud and the neighbors don’t care. Where we’ve got a big fire going, kids jumping on the trampoline and everybody’s running around and having fun,” Sova said. “That, to us, is Three Percent.”

Sova’s critics reject that idealized image, especially after seeing Three Percenter flags among the rioters at the U.S. Capitol.

Parents opposing Sova dug up photos of her two sons making the Three Percent hand sign. During the campaign, Sova peeled off the Three Percenter decals on her car, not to appease anyone, she said, but because she was tired of detractors taking pictures when she parked in town.

Sova said she also installed extra security measures to stop people from breaching her property to snap photos of a black U.S. flag that she said symbolized “America in distress.” Researchers say it’s a popular right-wing signifier of a readiness to revolt.

“Believe me, I heard it this whole campaign,” Sova said of the “extremist” label attached to her. “I got called a white supremacist, a racist, a bigot.”

Things had taken a more sinister turn in recent weeks, Sova said, with a series of incidents that she suspects were politically motivated but can’t say for sure. There were bullet holes shot through her campaign signs and inspectors showing up to look into claims of animal abuse or reports that the family was running an illegal scrap yard.

And, most disturbingly, there was security camera footage showing how someone cut through the fence on one of their properties and lured away their 5-month-old German shepherd.

“We’re probably never going to get him back,” Sova said.

Sova said she expected hostility because of her politics - after all, Democrats in her own family stopped inviting her to Thanksgiving years ago - but she never imagined this level of ugliness over a school board race.

After the rancor of the campaign, Sova admitted, she was a little nervous about her first meeting. She glanced at the time and took a deep breath. Sova said she planned to stand by her own beliefs but also would look for common ground with her critics.

For starters, she agreed to wear a mask at meetings in accordance with board policy, a concession that could be seen as either shrewd or sincere.

“How do you make a change if you try to go against literally everything about the system? You can’t,” Sova said. “The best way to make a change is you go in there and listen. And I have to vote the way my heart tells me.”

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HEADLINE	01/08 Kent mayor, PD chief on Nazi controversy
SOURCE	https://www.kentreporter.com/news/kent-mayor-police-chief-release-statement-about-kammerzell-controversy/
GIST	<p>Kent Mayor Dana Ralph and Police Chief Rafael Padilla released a video and lengthy statement on Friday night, Jan. 7 about the controversy over the two-week suspension of Assistant Chief Derek Kammerzell after he posted a Nazi insignia on his office door.</p> <p>“I want to make it crystal clear that the actions by Derek Kammerzell should not have happened and the only suitable outcome for his actions going forward is that he no longer be an officer with the Kent Police Department,” Padilla said during his statement.</p> <p>Ralph asked in a Jan. 4 statement during a City Council meeting for the city attorney to request that the Kent Police Officers Association union ask Kammerzell to resign.</p> <p>The police union has not yet issued a response to the mayor’s request for Kammerzell’s resignation. Kammerzell is a 27-year veteran with the department.</p>

The latest statement is the third issued by city officials since the story first broke Dec. 30 on the Kent Reporter website.

In an initial joint statement from Ralph and Padilla, they backed the decision for a two-week suspension in July 2021 after an investigation into the matter following a September 2020 report to Padilla by another officer about Kammerzell posting the Nazi symbol above the nameplate on his office door.

Following public outcry about the issue and media coverage that spread from locally to nationally to internationally, including a story in the Jerusalem Post, Ralph asked for Kammerzell's resignation. As public outcry and media coverage continued, Padilla and Ralph decided to issue a third statement.

"Given the controversy surrounding Derek Kammerzell, I felt it was important to directly address our residents with my thoughts on this issue," Ralph said on Jan. 7. "Before that, I'm going to turn it over to Chief Padilla to provide some additional context about our decision-making process and handling of the situation."

No statements about the investigation and suspension from city or police officials were released until the Kent group No Secret Police made a Public Records Request for documents on the Kammerzell incident and then released those documents in late December to the media after the city fulfilled the public disclosure request.

No Secret Police in a Jan. 7 email to the Kent Reporter disputed Padilla's timeline about when Kammerzell was placed on paid administrative leave in his statement below. Padilla received an outside law firm's investigator's report about the matter on Feb. 3, 2021. Padilla placed Kammerzell on leave March 8, nearly six months after the report of the incident and not until an investigation was completed.

"There has been reports about whether the employee was placed on administrative leave," Padilla said in his Jan. 7 statement. "I want to confirm that at the point in the investigation that it became apparent that termination was a possible outcome, I placed the employee on administrative leave."

No Secret Police sent a Feb. 16, 2021 email to the City Council asking why an assistant chief had not been placed on leave during the investigation.

"That forced his hand to finally place him on leave," according to a Jan. 8 email from No Secret Police.

Padilla admitted in his Jan. 7 statement that the two-week suspension wasn't enough although at the time he believed it was the right move.

"Taking all of this into account, and after considerable discussion, analysis, and deliberation we made the legally defensible decision with the information we had and clearly that was not enough.

Here is Padilla's Jan. 7 statement:

"This is an incredibly important discussion and there are many pieces to it. It is important that I provide information that is as accurate as I can. For this reason, from time to time I will be referencing from my notes.

I want to start by acknowledging the devastating impact this incident has had on our community and our department. The aftermath of this has me heartbroken and embarrassed.

It is my hope that by providing this additional information today we reaffirm to all of you that we are a department that strives to meet the highest standards in all areas, but particularly in the area of race, equity, and inclusion.

I want to make it crystal clear that the actions by Derek Kammerzell should not have happened and the only suitable outcome for his actions going forward is that he no longer be an officer with the Kent Police Department.

I do also want to note that the investigative file is extensive, hundreds of pages long and I do not have perfect recall of its contents. The information I am presenting is available in the record that has been widely distributed.

It is not possible or likely productive to attempt to cover every detail of the investigation, so I will be providing a condensed summary overview of what happened.

This incident was brought to our attention by officers within our department in September of 2020. What followed was that I called for an internal affairs investigation be conducted.

I do want to point out that while there has been much made about the culture of our department, the truth is that most of our internal investigations start because our employees do the right thing and bring that information to our attention. That is exactly what happened in this case.

The initial allegations against the employee included:

- That he placed a printout of the rank insignia for Nazi SS General on the door to his office.
- In a separate incident, he encouraged a group of detectives to lie about the presence of Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) related social media alias accounts that had been requested in a public disclosure request
- To ensure that an unbiased and thorough investigation was completed we retained an independent law firm to conduct the investigation
- The process commenced and the following additional allegations came to light: • That the employee made an inappropriate joke about his grandfather dying during the Holocaust
- That he asked an employee to photo shop a personal photo of him using department resources (photo of him and dog)
- That he showed an employee a photograph on his personal cell phone of him wearing lederhosen with his mustache groomed in a Hitler style
- That he talked about a photo to another employee where he posed in a photograph presenting a “Hail Hitler” salute
- And that he was untruthful about knowing that the rank insignia was attributable to the Nazi SS General Rank

The additional allegations intensified the likelihood that termination of the employee could be the potential outcome of the investigation.

There has been reports about whether the employee was placed on administrative leave. I want to confirm that at the point in the investigation that it became apparent that termination was a possible outcome, I placed the employee on administrative leave.

I want to emphasize that termination was strongly considered during this process.

The investigation was completed, and the investigator submitted the investigative report that listed findings based on a preponderance of the evidence.

We also hired a second law firm, with well-established experience in labor law and disciplinary issues in the state. This firm reviewed the entire investigation process and provide legal guidance as to what discipline would be sustained by an arbitrator.

We do this to ensure any individual or organizational bias will not adversely impact the process.

It should be noted that it is common practice for us to seek outside council to review investigations of this magnitude to provide independent recommendations on what discipline is legally defensible.

This process resulted in sustained findings that the employee violated the following policies:

- Violation City Policy 2.12 Harassment and Discrimination
- KPD Policy 13.10 Unbecoming Conduct.
- City Policy 2.09, Use of City

As many of you have seen with incidents where officers are terminated for misconduct and subsequently reinstated, we go to great lengths to ensure the disciplinary decisions we make are not likely to be overturned in a binding arbitration process.

In my opinion having an officer reinstated by an arbitrator, with back pay, becoming virtually untouchable from that point forward is a far worse outcome than issuing discipline, even lower levels of discipline, that ensure the employee receives corrective action and can be held accountable with progressive discipline including termination if the misconduct occurs again.

The standard of proof that apply to cases in which termination is the potential outcome is Clear in Convincing Evidence. As I have been well informed by legal advisors, this is a very high standard of proof, much higher than preponderance of the evidence standard.

The very clear and unwavering determination made from a legal perspective was that we did not have Clear and Convincing Evidence to prevail at an arbitration hearing should we have terminated the employee.

Other considerations that impact an arbitrator's support of our decision is the work history of our employee. While several allegations came forward during this investigation, the employee had 27 years of service without any prior discipline.

From a legal perspective, this was his first offense.

Taking all of this into account, and after considerable discussion, analysis, and deliberation we made the legally defensible decision with the information we had and clearly that was not enough.

I'd like to also take some time to discuss the accusations that the Kent Police Department has a racist culture.

Examples include social media posts on private social media accounts that cause a negative perception of our officers.

One specific post of concern was a leadership quote that is attributed to Nazi General Erwin Rommel. And while the quote itself is not offensive the fact that it is attributed to Rommel has to be something our officers are sensitive to.

Despite this being a private post on a private social media account, that was not visible to the general public, I took the step of having a discussion with the officer and the post was taken down.

In spring 2021, our officers participated in a city-wide Race and Equity course. Following the training we had employees provide feedback. That candid feedback indicated that some of our officers were resistant to the training. We were not deterred, and we continued to implement DEI training throughout 2021, with the most recent being Police and Community Relations Training conducted by Dwayne Bryant. The surveys from the officers following that training class were overwhelmingly positive. The most common comment from our officers was that the class was too short, and they wanted more. Which I think is a strong indicator that we have made progress culturally.

During that same training I do want to be transparent in noting that we had one employee who was emotionally impacted by the presentation and made the decisions to leave.

The employee self-reported that he had made that decision and apologized. The incident was investigated, and that employee was reprimanded. The additional corrective action taken was that the employee was then assigned to attend a longer version of the same training.

There are questions about how we onboard our people. The fact is that we have worked hard to update our training program to ensure we meet the highest expectations of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

While it is evident that we must continue to improve in this area, I will point to the overwhelming work over the years by Kent Officers who serve with compassion and care for our community as evidence that we are not a racist department.

Our officers are exceptional people and put themselves on the line to serve and protect all of us.

Because of our commitment to being a department continues to have a culture that stands against racism and hate, we completed an aggressive volume of training in this 2021.

- Race and Equity Training
- Supervisor Diversity Training
- Acknowledging and Managing Implicit Bias by Dr. Bryant Marks • Police and Community Relations by Dwayne Bryant

Moving forward I have been in contact with Jewish organizations who want to provide us training on Holocaust awareness with the goal of strengthening understanding, empathy, and connection to our Jewish community members.

I am committing publicly to completing that training in 2022 as soon as feasible. I can't thank them enough for wanting to help us become better.

Finally, I cannot state strongly enough that the conduct of the employee was wrong. It hurt our community and the important work our department has done to build our community relationships and trust. We are dedicated to the work ahead needed to restore that trust.

I strongly condemn the actions of the employee and I want our community to know that I believe that the only appropriate resolution of this matter is that Derek Kammerzell not be a part of our organization going forward."

Here is Mayor Ralph's Jan. 7 statement:

"Throughout the past several days, it has become quite clear to me that our community is really hurting, your trust in us has been damaged, and our response and handling of this situation has fallen short.

To be clear, I want to apologize to the Kent community for the wound that this situation has caused and acknowledge the hurt and frustration I have felt from Kent families.

As your mayor, the buck stops with me, and I want you to know that I am committed to moving forward on our response to this issue with complete transparency, honesty and integrity—and to be engaged in our community's healing.

At the end of the day, we haven't done enough, and the people of Kent are rightfully holding us accountable. For that, I'm grateful.

I strive each and every day to become a better public servant, to listen and learn, and ultimately, to act in the best interest of our community.

To value and validate the lived experiences of community members, to adapt and to grow as a leader and as a human being.

In regard to our decision on Kammerzell's discipline, Chief Padilla and I chose what we believed was the most legally defensible decision for us at the time.

We had an extremely difficult choice to make.

We were concerned that in this situation, the arbitrator could reinstate Kammerzell, leaving him undisciplined and without accountability.

Following the release of information about the incident and the reaction from the community, we understood that our collaborative decision on this matter wasn't enough, and I want to apologize to our residents, businesses and everyone who lives and works in Kent.

While we tried to mitigate the likely possibility that the City would face legal retaliation, it is clear to me now that we made the wrong choice.

There is no excuse for Kammerzell's poor judgement, behavior and actions, which have hurt our community and also hurt our officers and eroded the trust they have worked so hard to build with the people we serve.

Over the last several days as this story has gained traction and online conversations have escalated, misinformation has spread rapidly and turned to accusations of city leadership and staff of being supportive and even protective of Nazi ideology and racism.

Again, I want to be completely clear: Anti-Semitism, Nazism, white supremacy, bigotry, racism, discrimination and hateful rhetoric have absolutely no place or support at Kent City Hall or in the Kent Police Department.

We are committed to our journey as an anti-racist and welcoming city, and I am saddened and frustrated that the actions of this employee and our response have cast a shadow over the crucial work we have done and the progress we have made to champion and implement racial equity, diversity and inclusion reforms.

That work must and will continue, no matter what, and I welcome continued input and involvement from our community.

In regard to the more recent issue of replies being hidden by the @kentpd account on Twitter, this was done in accordance with our long-established community standards and social media comment policy, which explicitly reserves our right to moderate and remove comments or replies that contain obscene language or defame any person or organization or are not topically related to the particular posting on which the reply or comment was attached to.

To clarify, at no point was any comment or reply deleted, and at no point was any comment or reply hidden that did not violate these policies. Something to note as well is that hiding a reply does not prevent anyone from seeing it who wants to.

Specifically, comments containing contact information for the Council, the Chief and myself were never hidden, contrary to what is being claimed by some individuals and organizations.

For the time being, we have temporarily suspended our policy in the interest of transparency and will conduct an internal review of that policy and it's future implementation.

Moving forward, we will implement additional oversight over the moderation of comments and replies on our social media.

We've answered hundreds of emails, calls and direct messages surrounding this issue and will continue to stay engaged in the conversation.

This now brings me to a place where I would like to touch on some additional information that's out there and lacks context, but is crucial for getting the full picture here.

It's plain to see that this issue has caused significant outrage online and has received a lot of coverage.

I will say, it has been extremely humbling and frustrating to see the extent to which blatant disinformation has gained traction online and devolved to personal attacks, vitriol and unfounded accusations.

I completely support public disclosure efforts toward transparency and accountability and welcome this ongoing conversation about our handling of the situation and how we should have and will do better in the future.

But as this conversation has become public, there is a clear ongoing attempt to construct a narrative that our Police Department, the men and women who serve there, and city leadership are protecting Nazi ideology.

This is of course unequivocally false.

I've spoken with and heard from several of our officers who feel saddened and embarrassed with this incident and the way our department has been portrayed and have encouraged us to right this wrong.

While much work still lies ahead of us, we've made great strides here at the City of Kent to audit all of our internal processes and systems, create new positions and initiatives, provide opportunities for resident feedback and particularly consult with our communities of color.

Over the few years, we have made several sweeping reforms across our departments, particularly our Police Department, to advance our understanding and practice of equity.

Recently, we launched our Community Immersion Law Enforcement Program, which pairs new officers with community organizations during their first six months, before they ever begin their first patrol, to build relationships and trust and truly get to know and understand the community they serve.

We've conducted robust community engagement, focusing on BIPOC perspectives and lived experiences, and worked with community stakeholders to select areas of focus and co-design the priorities for our Equity Strategic Plan.

After dedicating considerable time engaging and listening to our community, we established a Race and Equity Commander position, completed a review and update of all use of force policies, and implementing updated de-escalation & use of force training.

	<p>These are just a few of the initiatives we have launched.</p> <p>The men and women of our Police Department are dedicated to building public trust and legitimacy within our community through continued open communication and transparency with those we serve.</p> <p>I have also been in ongoing conversations with the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle to rebuild trust and create a plan for listening sessions and educational opportunities with our city employees.</p> <p>I will be coordinating with them to work closely with our Race & Equity Manager to provide guidance as we continue the development of our city-wide Race & Equity Strategic Plan.</p> <p>Moving forward, I am completely committed to repairing the harm that has been done to our community, rebuilding trust and demonstrating our clear intent to condemn racist and hateful rhetoric and ideologies in our city wherever they may appear.</p> <p>We're dedicated to learning from this experience and the perspectives of our community.</p> <p>I've been in touch with several legislators about our priorities for the coming session, including a legislative solution on police reform which empowers us with the ability to terminate an officer when confronted with someone that holds ideas or acts in ways that do not align with our values, culture and commitment to anti-racism.</p> <p>To our community, to the greater region, I want to say I am sorry.</p> <p>We've let you down, and I know that there is real hurt out there. You've taken the time to share with me, with the chief and our city council, and for that I am grateful.</p> <p>There is nothing more powerful than dialogue and learning and understanding—it's how we move forward as a community. It's how we continue the journey we're so dedicated to, becoming an anti-racist and welcoming city.</p> <p>Kent is and will continue to be committed to making this a place where every single person, whether it be a resident, a business owner, feels welcome and heard and a part of something so powerful—and that is community.</p> <p>As your mayor, you have my heartfelt commitment and dedication to all of this work, and I will say that I am eternally grateful for the ability to serve you and the responsibility that comes with that, I take it very seriously.</p> <p>I know that we can and will be better going forward.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 New UFO office: disclosure or deception?
SOURCE	https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/disclosure-or-deception-new-ufo-pentagon-office-divides-believers-n1287199
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The U.S. government is finally getting back into the UFO business.</p> <p>And depending on which UFO believer you ask, it's either a historic step forward to getting to the bottom of conspiracies or a ploy to regain control of the narrative — and possibly even prepare for interplanetary war.</p> <p>The establishment of a new office, signed into law just before New Year's, to study “unidentified aerial phenomenon” has divided the loose community of activists, researchers and pseudo scientists who hunt for proof that we are not alone in the universe.</p>

Some hail the legislation creating the new office, tucked into [section 1683](#) of the massive National Defense Authorization Act, for bringing new resources, rigor and officialdom to the investigation of a phenomenon — and a potential national security threat — that has long been stigmatized in a way that [makes it difficult to study](#).

“Our national security efforts rely on aerial supremacy and these phenomena present a challenge to our dominance,” said Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., who spearheaded the bipartisan measure. “The United States needs a coordinated effort to take control and understand whether these aerial phenomena belong to a foreign government or something else altogether.”

It’s been decades since [Washington formally studied UFOs](#) in any kind of comprehensive way, so one might expect the news would be cause for celebration among so-called ufologists.

But the movement has long believed the government is covering up the greatest secret in history, so many are having a hard time believing the feds want to do anything other than clamp down again after several years in which it became [socially acceptable for former presidents and CIA directors](#) to talk publicly about weird things they’d seen in the skies.

On social media and forums like AboveTopSecret, a hub of ufology and conspiracy theories, debates have raged about whether the new office represents the beginning of the end of the alleged cover-up or its revival.

“This is a subject with a provable history of secrecy, and anything that lacks a new openness about the information is subject to more, possibly inappropriate control,” said Ron James, a spokesperson for the Mutual UFO Network, which bills itself as “the oldest and largest UFO organization in the world.”

“We don’t see that this means new resources will be dedicated to the matter. We believe that considerable resources have always been dedicated to the matter at some level inside deep government and industry,” James added.

Luis Elizondo and Christopher Mellon, the former government insiders who helped spark renewed interest in Unidentified Aerial Phenomena, or UAPs, as they are more commonly known now, by publicizing [video from military aircraft](#), applauded Gillibrand’s amendment — but worry it was watered down before final passage and will be buried by the Pentagon.

In an [op-ed in The Hill](#), Elizondo criticized the Pentagon’s decision to place the new UAP office inside the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence & Security, which he said is the “perfect place to put it” if “we want 70 more years of secrecy on this topic.”

Activists complain about the lack of civilian involvement in the new Pentagon office and assume it will simply classify anything interesting it finds, so that its unclassified reports to Congress will be little more than fig leaves.

Dr. Steven Greer, who retired from the emergency room to pursue the hunt for aliens as the self-described “world’s expert on UFOs,” objects to the notion that UFOs should be treated as a national security threat at all.

As he sees it, aliens are here to help us and the military-industrial complex is hyping their danger and creating the U.S. Space Force to prepare for interplanetary war, arguing movies like “Independence Day” are part of “[a false narrative](#) created by covert groups striving to generate fear of ETs.”

But Stephen Bassett, the only lobbyist in Washington dedicated to the “formal acknowledgement by the U.S. government of an extraterrestrial presence,” as his official lobbying [disclosure](#) puts it, sees this moment as the culmination of everything he and others have been working toward.

“No, this isn’t a new psyops program. It is a planned effort to end the truth embargo,” Bassett said.

“While I appreciate those who are skeptical, that group has tried to find the dark side of every development — the hidden hand.”

Instead of a renewed cover-up, Bassett views the new office as one piece of a multiyear plan by a faction of insiders to finally force the government to reveal that it has had contact with aliens for decades.

“This is a sea change brought about by the work of thousands of people and activists over 70 years,” he said. “But some of these people can’t help but see it as a clever black ops mission.”

Meanwhile, the national security apparatus has more terrestrial concerns.

The Department of Defense moved quickly to set up the new Airborne Object Identification and Management Synchronization Group, which will “synchronize efforts across the Department and the broader U.S. government to detect, identify and attribute objects of interests,” [according to the Pentagon](#).

The military has made it clear it's mainly focused on incursions into restricted airspace, such as military bases, and has talked more about drones and [new technologies](#) developed by the Russians, Chinese and other earthlings.

The language of the legislation itself goes a bit further, calling for rapid field investigations of UAP incidents, including “adverse physiological effects.” It envisions the “testing of materials, medical studies, and development of theoretical models,” as well potential future investment, to “replicate any such advanced characteristics and performance” discovered.

To Mick West, a prominent UFO debunker and villain of the ufologists, the believers have “kind of hijacked real issues,” which is that military pilots have seen things they can’t explain.

“If you read the text of this legislation, it seems to reflect concerns of the extraterrestrial hypothesis believers,” he said. “Now the military is sort of forced to jump through some slightly silly hoops while doing serious work.”

Whatever the new office reveals, he worries it will only further convince those who want to believe — whether because they’ll say the government is finally acknowledging the truth about aliens or because it’s still covering up the good stuff.

“I think it's going to clear some things up, but also going to add some fuel to the fire,” he said.

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HEADLINE	01/08 Autoimmune disease spread: western diet?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/science/2022/jan/08/global-spread-of-autoimmune-disease-blamed-on-western-diet
GIST	<p>More and more people around the world are suffering because their immune systems can no longer tell the difference between healthy cells and invading micro-organisms. Disease defences that once protected them are instead attacking their tissue and organs.</p> <p>Major international research efforts are being made to fight this trend – including an initiative at London’s Francis Crick Institute, where two world experts, James Lee and Carola Vinuesa, have set up separate research groups to help pinpoint the precise causes of autoimmune disease, as these conditions are known.</p> <p>“Numbers of autoimmune cases began to increase about 40 years ago in the west,” Lee told the <i>Observer</i>. “However, we are now seeing some emerge in countries that never had such diseases before.</p> <p>For example, the biggest recent increase in inflammatory bowel disease cases has been in the Middle East and east Asia. Before that they had hardly seen the disease.”</p>

Autoimmune diseases range from type 1 diabetes to rheumatoid arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease and [multiple sclerosis](#). In each case, the immune system gets its wires crossed and turns on healthy tissue instead of infectious agents.

In the UK alone, at least 4 million people have developed such conditions, with some individuals suffering more than one. Internationally, it is now estimated that cases of autoimmune diseases are rising by between 3% and 9% a year. Most scientists believe environmental factors play a key role in this rise.

“Human genetics hasn’t altered over the past few decades,” said Lee, who was previously based at Cambridge University. “So something must be changing in the outside world in a way that is increasing our predisposition to autoimmune disease.”

This idea was backed by Vinuesa, who was previously based at the Australian National University. She pointed to changes in diet that were occurring as more and more countries adopted western-style diets and people bought more fast food.

“[Fast-food diets](#) lack certain important ingredients, such as fibre, and evidence suggests this alteration affects a person’s microbiome – the collection of micro-organisms that we have in our gut and which play a key role in controlling various bodily functions,” Vinuesa said.

“These changes in our microbiomes are then triggering autoimmune diseases, of which more than 100 types have now been discovered.”

Both scientists stressed that individual susceptibilities were involved in contracting such illnesses, ailments that also include celiac disease as well as lupus, which triggers inflammation and swelling and can cause damage to various organs, including the heart.

“If you don’t have a certain genetic susceptibility, you won’t necessarily get an autoimmune disease, no matter how many Big Macs you eat,” said Vinuesa. “There is not a lot we can do to halt the global spread of fast-food franchises. So instead, we are trying to understand the fundamental genetic mechanisms that underpin autoimmune diseases and make some people susceptible but others not. We want to tackle the issue at that level.”

This task is possible thanks to the development of techniques that now allow scientists to pinpoint tiny DNA differences among large numbers of individuals. In this way, it is possible to identify common genetic patterns among those suffering from an autoimmune disease.

“Until very recently, we just didn’t have the tools to do that, but now we have this incredible power to sequence DNA on a large scale and that has changed everything,” said Lee. “When I started doing research, we knew about half a dozen DNA variants that were involved in triggering inflammatory bowel disease. Now we know of more than 250.”

Such work lies at the core of Lee and Vinuesa’s efforts, which aim to find out how these different genetic pathways operate and unravel the many different types of disease doctors are now looking at. “If you look at some autoimmune diseases – for example, lupus – it has become clear recently there are many different versions of them, that may be caused by different genetic pathways,” said Vinuesa.

“And that has a consequence when you are trying to find the right treatment.

“We have lots of potentially useful new therapies that are being developed all the time, but we don’t know which patients to give them to, because we now realise we don’t know exactly which version of the disease they have. And that is now a key goal for autoimmune research. We have to learn how to group and stratify patients so we can give them the right therapy.”

Lee also stressed that surging cases of autoimmune diseases across the world meant new treatments and drugs were now urgently needed more than ever before. “At present, there are no cures for autoimmune

	<p>diseases, which usually develop in young people – while they are trying to complete their education, get their first job and have families,” he said.</p> <p>“That means growing numbers of people face surgery or will have to have regular injections for the rest of their lives. It can be grim for patients and a massive strain on health services. Hence the urgent need to find new, effective treatments.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 Unusual amount lightning Gulf, Southwest
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2022/01/08/lightning-strikes-most-us-2021/
GIST	<p>If you were living near the U.S. Gulf Coast or Southwest in 2021, you were no stranger to lightning. Between an active monsoon and abnormally high number of tropical storms, streaks of energy raced through the atmosphere in record numbers. Newly released data shows that those regions experienced more lightning last year than in the previous five years on average.</p> <p>“When you look at lightning counts, you get a feel for how stormy the year was, how much instability was there in the atmosphere, how much precipitation was there,” said Chris Vagasky, a meteorologist with the company Vaisala, which operates a network of lightning sensors in the U.S. for almost 40 years and globally for 10 years.</p> <p>Lightning is a large natural spark of electricity, caused by an imbalance of electrical charges in the atmosphere. Most lightning is formed from thunderstorm clouds, which develop when warm, moist air rises into cold air, often during warmer seasons. A storm’s lightning flash rate is often related to a storm’s severity, or how deep the thunderstorm cloud is.</p> <p>Vaisala sensors detected more than 194 million lightning events in 2021, about 24 million more than in 2020, which was an extremely low year. Despite the increased activity, the nation’s lightning in 2021 was below recent averages for the second year in a row. Thirty-two of the Lower 48 experienced lower-than-normal activity. But although the exceptions were few, they were grand.</p> <p>“There’s a background level of lightning that you would expect, and then you have extreme events that take that up above the background level, or you have droughts, or high pressure systems in certain locations, that then takes things down below the average,” Vagasky said.</p> <p>The United States also hit a record low for lightning deaths in 2021 at less than 12 fatalities, although the decrease also may be attributable to better awareness and more caution or potentially even people quarantining indoors because of the pandemic.</p> <p>Top lightning spots</p> <p>Vaisala data indicates that the United States experienced the second-highest lightning count worldwide — not necessarily surprising, given the country’s size and the fact it typically is one of the stormiest locations in the world because of extreme north-south temperature contrasts.</p> <p>In 2021, the top two states to experience lightning were Texas and Florida. The two often take the top spots because of their relatively tropical and less stable atmospheres, which make thunderstorms more common than in other parts of the nation. Texas and Florida experienced the most lightning in 2020 as well.</p> <p>In a somewhat unexpected shift, Louisiana experienced the third-highest lightning counts in the United States last year — topping traditional lightning powerhouses such as Oklahoma, Kansas and Missouri. The activity probably was tied to the active hurricane season, which was headlined by Category 4 Ida.</p> <p>“There were several systems that tracked right along the Gulf Coast or made landfall right around the Louisiana area,” said meteorologist Elizabeth DiGangi. “A lot of lightning you may see in tropical systems is in the outer rain bands. Even something that made landfall in the Houston area would have ended up providing a good bit of rainfall and lightning to Louisiana as well.”</p>

Meanwhile, the Southeast and Central Plains experienced a quieter-than-normal severe weather season in the spring. According to Vaisala's data, Oklahoma experienced fewer than 10 million lightning events — about 1 to 2 million fewer than normal.

"Oklahoma, Kansas, and Missouri all moved down a spot this year. They were all lower than what you would normally expect to see for lightning, and there was less severe weather reported in these areas," Vagasky said. "It's kind of another down year for tornadoes up until December, unfortunately."

On Dec. 10, a tornado outbreak ravaged the Southeast from Arkansas to Kentucky, where more than 70 people died. Then on Dec. 15, a line of violent thunderstorms and tornadoes, or a [derecho](#), unleashed damage in seven states in the central United States.

Sensors detected more than 3 million lightning events in December 2021, a bit more than normal for the month, Vagasky said.

Unusual lightning

Most notable was that last year marked the return of an active monsoon season in the Southwest. After 2020's "non-monsoon," 2021 came back with a roar — and with lightning. Vaisala data showed Arizona experienced around 3.5 million lightning events — 2 million more than in the previous year. Southern California in the U.S.-Mexico border area experienced more than twice the average number of lightning events.

"In both 2019 and 2020, the monsoon basically failed to develop, for other large-scale atmospheric reasons. It was probably some much-needed relief this year for the area, but that did mean that there was more lightning for sure in that area than there was in previous years," said DiGangi, a lightning researcher at Earth Networks.

Earth Networks operates a global network of lightning ground sensors that provide data to government entities, emergency management organizations, aviation companies and other private-sector entities. The company also detected a slight increase in lightning counts from 2020 to 2021 with their sensors.

In addition to lightning counts, DiGangi and her colleagues at Earth Networks count [thunder days and thunder hours](#) per year to measure the storminess of an area. A thunder day is one on which a person at a given location can hear thunder caused by a nearby storm.

Thunder is created when lightning travels through the atmosphere, heating the air to 50,000 degrees. When the air cools shortly after the lightning flash, the rapid expansion and contraction creates a sonic discharge, the rumble of thunder. The thunder day metric relies less on the number of lightning flashes detected and more on the convection present in a certain mile radius.

In 2021, Earth Networks counted more than 7,800 thunder days across the United States — a 4 percent increase from 2020. Similar to the Vaisala lightning data, Texas, Florida and Louisiana experienced the most thunder days. New Mexico, while not ranking in the top 10 for lightning counts, did have the ninth-highest number of thunder days in the nation last year.

"You can get a sense of what locations experience a lot of active convection versus places where it's less common," said DiGangi. "It tells you more about if the location experiences storms, which is our kind of primary concern in a lot of ways, because it's the storm bringing the rain, it's the storm bringing the wind, the severe events and, of course, the lightning."

In addition to the Southwest, other states across the northern United States experienced anomalous amounts of lightning and thunder days. Michigan registered an unusually high number of lightning strikes for 2021, thanks to a slew of summer storms every couple of weeks.

“In 2020, Michigan had what we think was their biggest year, and then that was surpassed [in 2021],” Vagasky said.

Many northeastern states, such as Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Massachusetts, also experienced higher-than-normal numbers of lightning events. Vagasky cites abundant tropical storm activity as well as the multiple active weather patterns traveling from the Great Lakes region.

Although the nation’s overall lightning activity was below average again, researchers do not think the current lightning trends are necessarily tied to climate change — at least not in the United States. Vaisala data over 30 years shows that trends in the United States have been relatively consistent, with annual ups and downs based on weather patterns.

“In a broader sense, with the climate warming up, we would have more updrafts and we would have more thunderstorms,” said Rachel Albrecht, a professor and lightning researcher at the University of São Paulo. “But it is not homogeneous around the globe.”

This year, the Arctic experienced more lightning than it did from 2012-2020 combined, according to Vaisala data. Lightning in the Arctic is particularly concerning because it indicates an increase in warm and moist air intrusions into the high latitudes. Vagasky said background warming helps to drive some of these weather patterns.

“We know that climate is changing faster in the Arctic than anywhere else on the Earth,” Vagasky said. “Monitoring these trends really helps us get a good feel for exactly what’s happening up there.”

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HEADLINE	01/08 NYC ‘public health vending machines’
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/08/nyregion/naloxone-vending-machines-nyc.html
GIST	<p>New York City health officials have announced a plan to install 10 “public health vending machines” that would dispense sterile syringes, an anti-overdose medication and other “harm reduction” supplies to help neighborhoods that have been hit hard by drug overdoses.</p> <p>The vending machines, which are planned for neighborhoods in all five boroughs, will also carry toiletries and safe-sex kits, according to Michael McRae, acting executive deputy commissioner of the city’s health department. All items in the vending machines will be free, he said, adding that the department hoped to have the vending machines on the street this year.</p> <p>“This is really about expanding access to health and wellness services,” he said of the initiative, a \$730,000 pilot program seeking up to six contractors.</p> <p>The main purpose of the vending machines is to curb overdoses across the city by increasing the availability of naloxone, a drug that works to quickly reverse the effects of an opioid overdose. “Every four hours there’s an overdose here,” Dr. McRae said. “This is something that doesn’t allow for people to die every hour.”</p> <p>As they have across the country, opioid deaths in New York City, have risen significantly during the coronavirus pandemic. There were 2,062 overdose deaths in the city in 2020, according to data published last year by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene — the highest total since reporting on overdose deaths began in 2000 and over 500 more than in 2019.</p> <p>“Overdose deaths in New York City are not equally distributed citywide, with some groups and neighborhoods disproportionately experiencing increases,” the nonprofit Fund for Public Health in New York said last month in a request for proposals from organizations interested in taking the lead on the project. The fund, which issued the request on behalf of the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, set a Jan. 20 deadline for proposals. The health department will award the contracts on Jan. 31.</p>

According to [2020 health department data](#), overdose deaths among white New Yorkers had decreased during the preceding three years, while rates among Black New Yorkers had increased in the previous year, and rates among Latinos had increased for five consecutive years.

Residents in impoverished Black and Latino neighborhoods like Mott Haven in the South Bronx and East Harlem in Manhattan reported the highest rates of unintentional overdose deaths in 2020.

“Structural racism in drug policy and enforcement has been linked to decreased access to services, poorer health outcomes and increased overdose risk,” the request said.

The solicitation for proposals identified several neighborhoods as priorities for the machines, including Central Harlem and Union Square in Manhattan, Far Rockaway in Queens, Stapleton in Staten Island and East New York in Brooklyn.

Access to clean needles is important to prevent the spread of H.I.V. and hepatitis C as well as skin and soft tissue infections, Mike Selick, an associate director at the National Harm Reduction Coalition, said on Thursday.

“We know that syringe access is effective; this is just another form of it,” he said in an interview. Syringe access programs are a [proven way to slash H.I.V. infection rates](#) by limiting the reuse of contaminated needles, according the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Proposals like New York’s are “about making the material, the health equipment and the health supplies accessible to the people who need it the most, where they’re already at, on their schedule and on their timeline, and without the stigma or shame,” Sheila P. Vakharia, deputy director for research and academic engagement at the Drug Policy Alliance, said on Thursday.

In New York State, people can already get up to 10 clean syringes at pharmacies participating in the state’s [Expanded Syringe Access Program](#). But according to Dr. Vakharia, many drug users would rather avoid a face-to-face interaction with a pharmacist, and many pharmacies are closed late at night, when drug use is more prevalent and people need safe supplies the most.

The same goes for access to naloxone, she added. “It’s a medication that should be readily available and accessible to people when they need it the most, and it doesn’t hurt if we can make” it more readily available, she said.

Critics of the proposal have said that the vending machines fail to address the most critical issues around addiction.

“I agree we cannot ignore the devastating data on drug addiction and overdoses without doing more,” Councilman David Carr, a Staten Island Republican who represents one of the neighborhoods prioritized in the plan, said in an email on Thursday.

“But I feel it is irresponsible to simply place vending machines filled with syringes and Narcan in neighborhoods, without providing addicts the support and real assistance they need,” he added, referring to a brand-name version of naloxone.

But advocates of the plan maintain that installing the vending machines is “the smart thing to do.”

“We don’t want it to be easier to get dirty needles,” Mr. Selick, of the National Harm Reduction Coalition, said. “We don’t want it to be easier to get drugs on the street than it is to get the help and the supplies and the good information that you need to know.”

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HEADLINE	01/07 Worry: ‘drastic’ rise in high Arctic lightning
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jan/07/lightning-high-arctic-rise-scientists-worried

GIST	<p>The high Arctic saw a dramatic rise in lightning in 2021 in what could be one of the most spectacular manifestations of the climate crisis.</p> <p>In a region where sightings were once rare, the Earth’s northernmost region saw 7,278 lightning strikes in 2021 – nearly double as many as the previous nine years combined.</p> <p>Arctic air typically lacks the convective heat required to create lightning so the latest findings, published in the Finnish firm Vaisala’s annual lightning report, have scientists like Vaisala’s meteorologist and lightning applications manager, Chris Vagasky, worried.</p> <p>“Over the last 10 years, overall lightning counts north of the Arctic Circle have been fairly consistent,” Vagasky said. “But at the highest latitudes of the planet – north of 80° – the increase has been drastic. Such a significant shift certainly causes you to raise your eyebrows.”</p> <p>With temperatures rising in the Arctic at three times the global average, tracking lightning in the region has become an important indicator of the climate crisis.</p> <p>Three things are required to generate thunderstorms – moisture, instability and lift. The disappearance of sea ice means more water is able to evaporate, adding moisture to the atmosphere. Higher temperatures and atmospheric instability create the perfect conditions for lightning. Monitoring how lightning trends change in the Arctic can therefore reveal a lot about how the atmosphere is changing in response to shifts in climate.</p> <p>“Changes in the Arctic can mean changes in the weather at home,” Vagasky said. “All weather is local, but what happens at your house depends on how the atmosphere is behaving elsewhere throughout the world. Changes to conditions in the Arctic could cause more extreme cold outbreaks, more heatwaves, or extreme changes in precipitation to Europe.”</p> <p>The devastating wildfires that raged across Europe and North America last summer were at least in part sparked by lightning. Typically less than 15% of wildfires in any given year are caused by lightning, but these fires burn more acreage than human-caused fires. Identifying the conditions favourable for lightning-triggered wildfires is crucial to react quickly to strikes.</p> <p>The risk of being hit by lightning in the Arctic is still low, but the increased probability of lightning could threaten communities that have not had to deal with frequent lightning in the past. People on the flat tundra or ocean are vulnerable to lightning strikes, and lightning puts electrical and other infrastructure at risk of damage.</p> <p>In the US, which saw the second-highest number of lightning strikes in 2021 after Brazil, Vagasky and his team tracked more than 194m incidences – 24m more than observed in 2020. A 2014 study forecast a 12% increase in the frequency of lightning strikes with every one degree Celsius increase in temperature.</p> <p>“A changing climate may increase the potential for lightning-triggered wildfires,” Vagasky said. “Scientists can’t tie a lightning strike from one day to the changes in our climate, but monitoring trends of lightning in the Arctic is especially important and something that will need to be studied now and in the future.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/07 Heat records broken: 400 weather stations
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/07/heat-records-broken-all-around-the-world-in-2021-says-climatologist
GIST	More than 400 weather stations around the world beat their all-time highest temperature records in 2021, according to a climatologist who has been compiling weather records for over 30 years.

[Maximiliano Herrera](#) keeps track of extreme weather around the world, and publishes an annual list of records broken in the previous year. He and many other climatologists and meteorologists who follow these issues closely expect that 2021 will probably not be the hottest year in history (Noaa and Nasa will publish their results in the next few days).

But it is likely to be in the top five or six, [continuing the long-term upward trend](#). The past six years have been the six hottest on record.

And, as is now the norm, a sheaf of new heat records have been broken, according to Herrera. Ten countries – Oman, UAE, Canada, the United States, Morocco, Turkey, Taiwan, Italy, Tunisia and Dominica – broke or tied their national highest record, 107 countries beat their monthly high temperature record, and five beat their monthly low temperature record.

A few continental and planetary records fell too: Africa had its warmest [June and September](#) ever. August brought [48.8C \(119.8F\) in Syracuse](#), Italy, the highest temperature ever recorded in Europe. July had already brought 54.4C (130F) in [Furnace Creek in the US's Death Valley](#) – the highest reliably recorded temperature on Earth. (A temperature recorded as 129.9F in 2020 was also rounded up to 130F.)

But there were a few specific events that particularly stood out for experts. For meteorologist Patricia Nying'uro, a co-founder of [Climate Without Borders](#) and based at the Kenyan Meteorological Department, the two consecutive failed rain seasons in Kenya were unusual, and forced the government to organise for food aid for the first time in many years.

“You can certainly see the effect of climate change in our weather in Kenya, and globally. We're just putting together the data for 2021, but we think we will have seen an annual temperature which is 2.1C higher than normal for some parts of the country. The shifts are very noticeable, from one extreme to another in a very short space of time.”

This was one of the reasons Nying'uro helped found CWB, a group of broadcast meteorologists and weather presenters from around the world who share information on extreme weather events. They also support weather presenters to make the connections with climate change and communicate these to the public.

Meteorologist [Scott Duncan](#), who collects data on world weather, pointed to the European summer heatwaves, which broke records in a number of countries – and were accompanied by wildfires around the Mediterranean. They had been preceded by a hot March, a sharp cold shock in early April which “was catastrophic for many agricultural businesses in France”, and then the floods in July. “Those events really stood out for me.”

He also highlighted the heat in Alaska in December, where a number of records were broken by a large margin. “That was extraordinary.”

China experienced its hottest ever year, [according to](#) the China Meteorological Administration. But it was the rain that hit the central province of Henan that really shocked: the region was hit by more rain in three days than it normally receives in an entire year. Hundreds died, crops and homes were destroyed, and the cleanup continues. Jia Xiaolong, deputy head of the National Climate Centre, said the situation last year had been abnormal.

“Warming was the main theme of China's climate in 2021. In the context of [global warming](#), recurrent extreme weather and climate events have become the norm, which is also a major challenge to disaster prevention and mitigation.”

Other key unusual weather events last year were the Siberian heatwave in the summer, and the deep freeze in Texas in February. Nearly [200 people died](#), millions of homes were without power, and the fallout led to huge political rows.

	<p>Guy Walton, an activist meteorologist who has been campaigning on climate change since the late 1980s said “the cold outbreak in February 2021 leading to the failure of the power grid in Texas and dozens of deaths” was “ironically attributed to climate change by many”. He also highlighted “the extraordinary mild/warm fall leading to the warmest December on record for the United States. The National Centers for Environmental Information should make this official in the next couple of days.”</p> <p>But the key event of 2021 for the meteorological and climatological community was the extreme heatwave that struck the west coast of the US in June/July, led to a heat dome and broke records by up to 5C in some places. At the time, Geert Jan van Oldenborgh (who died in October 2021) of the Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute called it “way beyond the upper bound” and “surprising and shaking”.</p> <p>“Of course 2021 was full of extreme events,” said Herrera. “But if I have to name one, I’ll name what struck every single climatologist and meteorologist in the world.” Herrera nicknamed the event “the mother of all heatwaves”.</p> <p>“I confess, I would have never believed this to be even physically impossible. The magnitude of this event surpassed anything I have seen after a life of researching extreme events in all modern world climatic history in the past couple of centuries.”</p> <p>Meanwhile, 2022 has begun with a number of records already shattered in the UK and the US in the first few days of the year.</p>
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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	01/09 Homicide suspect dead Pierce Co.
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/homicide-suspect-dead-in-pierce-county/
GIST	<p>The Pierce County Force Investigation Team is handling a shooting incident that occurred early Sunday involving Pierce County Sheriff’s deputies that left a homicide suspect dead.</p> <p>Initial details of the incident are limited.</p> <p>According to posts on the Pierce County Sheriff’s social media accounts:</p> <p>Deputies were dispatched shortly after midnight to the small town of Carbonado, near the northwest corner of Mount Rainier National Park, to assist the Buckley Police Department with a homicide response.</p> <p>Deputies stopped a vehicle related to the homicide at Mundy Loss Road East between Highway 410 and 96th Street East. “There were shots fired,” said Pierce County Sherriff’s Sgt. Darren Moss in a video posted to Twitter early Sunday.</p> <p>Deputies were not injured.</p> <p>A SWAT team approached the vehicle and found the male suspect dead inside.</p> <p>Reached via email late Sunday, Moss referred questions to the multiagency force investigation team, which is tasked with investigating deadly force incidents involving law-enforcement officers in the county. He said the Metro Crime Response Unit investigation team, also a multiagency group, is investigating the homicide.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Marysville police: explosive at gas station
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SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/marysville-police-looking-for-suspects-who-placed-explosive-near-gas-station
GIST	<p>MARYSVILLE, Wash. - Marysville Police are asking for the public's help to identify the suspect or suspects who placed this improvised explosive device underneath the Jackson's Shell Gas Station sign.</p> <p>Marysville Patrol Officers were to 1209 4th Street today after a caller observed an item on the Northwest corner of the property, which resembled a firework-type mortar with a large fuse coming out of it.</p> <p>Officers arrived on scene and immediately cleared the gas station of employees and customers, closing the business during the investigation. Surrounding residences who were also potentially at risk were evacuated.</p> <p>Officers and Marysville Fire Department determined the item to be a legitimate threat, and requested the assistance of Washington State Patrol Bomb Squad.</p> <p>WSP arrived on scene and rendered the device safe.</p> <p>It appeared that the person(s) who left the device did attempt to light it but were unsuccessful.</p> <p>This is an ongoing investigation and officers are asking anyone who may have seen something around 1:30 PM today, to please report to Marysville Police at 360-363-8300.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 Statewide anti-human trafficking campaign
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/transportation/washington-launches-first-ever-statewide-anti-human-trafficking-campaign/
GIST	<p>In observance of Human Trafficking Awareness Month, cities, counties, transit authorities, airports, and seaports across Washington and beyond are combining forces to prevent human trafficking with the Not Alone campaign, a statewide initiative to encourage victims of human trafficking to seek help.</p> <p>Not Alone was conceived and launched in Washington state by Rebekah Covington, a survivor of human trafficking and Corporate Relations Manager at BEST (Businesses Ending Slavery and Trafficking), to raise awareness about human trafficking and help victims and survivors self-identify and get connected with services by calling the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888 or texting 233733 (BEFREE).</p> <p>“When people are trafficked, they feel isolated and with an inability to leave the situation,” explained Covington. “To create this campaign, we prioritized input from people with the lived experienced of trafficking. People experiencing trafficking will see signs that speak directly to them to give them hope that they are not alone — there is a way out of whatever terrible situation they are in.”</p> <p>Human Trafficking in Aviation, Maritime, and Mass Transportation</p> <p>Not Alone is one of the first campaigns to focus on victim and survivor self-identification rather than general public awareness. Surveys of trafficking victims indicated that 38% traveled by plane at some point during their exploitation, 63% reported using mass transit during their exploitation, and 26% reported that public and mass transportation played a role in at least one exit attempt.</p> <p>Twenty-six partner organizations are hanging multilingual signage in English, Spanish, Russian, Chinese (Mandarin), Korean, Vietnamese, and Somali throughout the state, including transit facilities, buses, terminals, restrooms, airport and seaport facilities, and buildings serving vulnerable populations.</p> <p>In addition, BEST is offering free human trafficking prevention training for employees throughout the month of January.</p> <p>“We are doubling down on our commitment to ending human trafficking for a fourth consecutive year,” said Port of Seattle Commissioner Sam Cho. “Displaying these posters at Seattle-Tacoma International</p>

	<p>Airport and the Port’s maritime facilities helps to ensure that anyone who sees them knows they are not alone and there is help. We pair this work with required employee training, so our team knows how to spot and interrupt this pandemic of human rights.”</p> <p>The Not Alone posters and BEST’s online training direct individuals to contact the National Human Trafficking Hotline. The Hotline is available for anyone to call 1 (888) 373-7888, text 233733 (BEFREE), or chat online at https://humantraffickinghotline.org/. The Hotline is free and available 24/7/365. It is available in English and Spanish, in addition to 200 other languages.</p>
Return to Top	Read more at the Port of Seattle

HEADLINE	01/07 Incels as potential threat actors
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/featured/with-focus-on-domestic-extremism-be-vigilant-for-escalating-incel-threat/
GIST	<p>At the onset of the pandemic, the Cambridge Cybercrime Centre observed a significant increase in murderous fantasies expressed online within the incel community. The level of online activity, as well as the tone, had grown increasingly threatening. Fortunately, that level of violent ideation seemed to settle down over time but now has resurfaced.</p> <p>This week, the Centre for Countering Digital Hate found that UK web traffic data to three of the largest incel sites has grown from 114,420 monthly visits to 638,505, over the period of March to November 2021. That represents a sixfold rise in activity on websites promoting incel ideology. Also significant is the call to action for the rape of women.</p> <p>More than “loners,” incels are stark examples of “incompetent joiners” – young angry men fueled by a sense of aggrieved entitlement that they are being cheated out of the romantic and sexual experiences they rightfully deserve.</p> <p>Incels, short for involuntary celibates, are probably the most infamous segment of the manosphere – the online morass of misogyny that includes incels, Pick Up Artists (PUAs), MGTOWs (Men Going Their Own Way), and Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs). They also appear to be the most prone to public displays of brutality: Law enforcement attributes 50 murders in North America in the past several years to violent incels. While existing entirely in a virtual global community, incels are bound together by an ideology that preaches hatred of women and has inspired deadly real-world attacks.</p> <p>In the UK incel community, the August 2021 attacker in Plymouth has been lionized. That 22-year-old man’s social media usage suggested an obsession with incel culture. He also called for “all women to be raped at least once.” On December 27, a Denver man harboring extremist views killed five people in a shooting spree. That 47-year-old man, while not a self-professed incel, had complained about “modern/liberal suppression” of “male honor violence” and raged against “female premarital sex” in various Twitter posts – all views consistent with incel ideology.</p> <p>While many of us are thinking about the anniversary of the January 6 insurrection, and news broadcasts are replete with images of the screaming shaman and kitted-up militia members, let’s not take our eyes off of other persistent threats on the horizon.</p> <p>Misogyny is a dangerous and underestimated component of extremism, and there is a robust symbiosis between incel culture and other violent ideologies. Changes in the landscape involving the dramatic escalation in pandemic cases, the tense political environment, and challenging economy all can further destabilize the already volatile incel community. Don’t underestimate incels as potential threat actors.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Mexico charges 7 in ‘Fast, Furious’ scandal
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/9/mexico-charges-7-in-fast-and-furious-weapons-traff/
GIST	MEXICO CITY — Mexican prosecutors said Sunday they have charged seven people, including former top officials, in the “Fast and Furious” weapons trafficking scandal.

The December 2010 murder of Border Patrol agent Brian Terry exposed the bungled “Fast and Furious” investigation, in which agents from the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives allowed criminals to buy guns with the intention of tracking the weapons.

But the agency lost most of the guns, including two that were found at the scene of Terry’s death in southern Arizona. The U.S. government has heavily pursued prosecution of the men involved in the killing.

Mexico says Mexican drug gangs and former officials also participated in or failed to stop the weapons trafficking.

Mexico’s Attorney General’s Office said Sunday it has lodged weapons trafficking charges against seven people in the more-than-decade-old case, including the country’s former top police official, Genaro Garcia Luna, and former drug lord Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman.

Garcia Luna was arrested in Texas in 2019 and currently faces trial in the U.S. for allegedly protecting a drug gang. Mexico has asked for his extradition to face charges of illegal enrichment.

García Luna served as security chief in President Felipe Calderón’s 2006-2012 administration and was the leader of the government’s fight against organized crime.

Also charged was former Federal Police commander Luis Cardenas Palomino, who was considered the right-hand man of García Luna. Mexico already arrested Cardenas Palomino on charges of torture, and U.S. prosecutors have separately accused him of accepting millions in bribes from the Sinaloa cartel.

Mexico also charged Guzman in the weapons trafficking case, but he is already serving a life sentence in Colorado.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Vandals irreparably damage ancient rock art
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/09/us/big-bend-park-rock-vandalism.html
GIST	<p>Abstract geometric designs at Big Bend National Park in Texas that had survived for thousands of years were “irreparably damaged” by vandals who scratched names and dates into the prehistoric designs, the National Park Service said.</p> <p>The Park Service said on its website that the ancient rock art was damaged on Dec. 26 in the Indian Head area of the park, which encompasses more than 800,000 acres in southwest Texas and stretches along 118 miles of the United States border with Mexico.</p> <p>Since 2015, archaeologists at the park have documented more than 50 instances of vandalism, the Park Service said.</p> <p>Damaging park resources is against federal law and defacing rock art and ancient cultural sites violates the Archaeological Resources Protection Act, which aims to protect archaeological resources and sites on federal and Native American lands.</p> <p>Tom Alex, an archaeologist who retired from the park in 2014 after working there for 32 years, said that the damaged abstract designs were known as petroglyphs and that they had been pecked into the rock panel.</p> <p>“There’s wavy lines, curvilinear lines, geometric patterns, squiggles and things that just kind of meander across the rock surface,” Mr. Alex said on Saturday.</p> <p>Mr. Alex said it was difficult to determine precisely how old the art was, but, based on the weathering, the petroglyphs were most likely made somewhere between 3,000 and 8,000 years ago. He said these types of</p>

designs represented some of the oldest rock art in North America. In the more recent time period, rock art included more representations of people and animals.

The abstract pecked art is common across the southwestern United States. It is not yet possible to determine what group of native people were responsible for the designs at Big Bend, Mr. Alex said.

It was also not known who damaged the rock art, though the person, or people, responsible left some clues. Four names were scrawled on the art: Adrian, Ariel, Isaac and Norma, according to photos shared by the Park Service. The year 2021 and the date “12-26-21” were also scratched on the rock.

Tom VandenBerg, the chief of interpretation and visitor services at Big Bend, [told Texas Monthly](#) that the park had received “pretty strong potential leads” about who was responsible for the vandalism. Mr. VandenBerg added that the park avoided providing maps and directions to the carvings to prevent damage to the ancient site.

Bob Krumenaker, the superintendent of Big Bend, condemned the vandalism in a [post on the park’s website](#). “Damaging natural features and rock art destroys the very beauty and history that the American people want to protect in our parks,” he said.

Park staff members tried to repair the damage, but much of it was permanent, the post said.

Mr. Alex said some of the scratches on the panel were superficial and possible to clean up so they would be less obvious, but others had penetrated the prehistoric designs. “Those scratches are going to be there forever,” he said.

Stewards of public lands have complained about an increase in vandalism and graffiti in [recent years](#).

[In December 2020](#), Zion National Park in Utah said that nearly every day, staff members there found “words and shapes carved, drawn, painted (with mud, dirt, pigment, paint) or scratched on rocks.”

[In January 2019](#), several of the signature spiky-leaved Joshua trees at Joshua Tree National Park in Southern California were damaged during a government shutdown.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Gunmen release 30 Nigeria captive students
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/world/official-30-nigerian-students-freed-after-7-months/
GIST	<p>ABUJA, Nigeria (AP) — Gunmen have released 30 Nigerian students who spent nearly seven months in captivity, a government official has said, the latest batch in the release of the dozens of Kebbi state students abducted in June.</p> <p>They arrived at the Kebbi state capital on Saturday along with one teacher, said a spokesperson for the Kebbi governor who did not give further details of their release. Kidnap ransoms for the release of hundreds of abducted students in the West African country are common.</p> <p>The students of Federal Government College in Kebbi were abducted on June 17 when gunmen stormed their school in Birnin-Yauri, which is about 220 kilometers (136 miles) from the state capital.</p> <p>Authorities have to date not announced the arrest of any of the abductors, who killed a police officer before they drove off with the students into nearby forests — a similar pattern to the abduction of more than 1,400 schoolchildren in Africa’s most populous country since the start of 2021, according to the U.N. children’s agency.</p> <p>Local officials were silent on the exact number of those missing from the Kebbi school after the attack but residents had said there were more than 70.</p>

	<p>The freed students “shall undergo medical screening and support while being reunited with their families,” Kebbi governor’s spokesman Yahaya Sarki said.</p> <p>This is the third batch of Kebbi students freed since their abduction seven months ago, the previous group of 30 brought home in October. Local authorities and freed hostages have told The Associated Press that the students are often freed in batches and not all at once because each release comes with fresh ransoms.</p> <p>“Every number you have ever heard, money exchanges hands as if they are going to release all, but they will release some numbers,” The Rev. John Hayab of the Bethel Baptist High School where gunmen once abducted at least 120 students told the AP last year.</p> <p>The abductions are carried out by the armed groups who have killed and abducted thousands in exchange for ransoms in the northwest and central parts of Nigeria.</p> <p>The first mass school abduction in Nigeria was carried out by the Boko Haram extremist group in 2014. But the West African nation has witnessed more than 10 other attacks on schools in the past year, a sudden spike that authorities have blamed on outnumbered security operatives in remote communities where the affected schools are mostly located.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Intel reports failed to forecast Capitol riot
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/intel-reports-repeatedly-failed-to-forecast-capitol-riot/
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — Intelligence reports compiled by the U.S. Capitol Police in the days before last year’s insurrection envisioned only an improbable or remote risk of violence, even as other assessments warned that crowds of potentially thousands of pro-Trump demonstrators could converge in Washington and create a dangerous situation.</p> <p>The documents, obtained by The Associated Press, underscore the uneven and muddled intelligence that circulated to Capitol Police officers ahead of the Jan. 6 riot, when thousands of Donald Trump loyalists swarmed the Capitol complex and clashed violently with law enforcement officers in their effort to disrupt the certification of the results of the 2020 presidential election. The intelligence reports in particular show how the police agency, up to the day of the riot itself, grievously underestimated the prospect of chaotic violence and disruptions.</p> <p>The contradictory intelligence produced by law enforcement leading up to the riot has been at the forefront of congressional scrutiny about the Jan. 6 preparations and response, with officials struggling to explain how they failed to anticipate and plan for the deadly riot at the Capitol that day. The shortcomings led to upheaval at the top ranks of the department, including the ouster of the chief, though the assistant chief in charge of protective and intelligence operations at the time remains in her position.</p> <p>There was, according to a harshly critical Senate report issued in June, “a lack of consensus about the gravity of the threat posed on January 6, 2021.”</p> <p>“Months following the attack on the U.S. Capitol, there is still no consensus among USCP officials about the intelligence reports’ threat analysis ahead of January 6, 2021,” the report stated.</p> <p>The documents, known as a “daily intelligence report” and marked “For Official Use Only,” have been described over the last year in congressional testimony and in the Senate report. The AP on Friday evening obtained full versions of the documents for Jan. 4, 5 and 6 of last year. The New York Times highlighted the Jan. 4 report in a story last year on intelligence shortcomings.</p> <p>On each of the three days, the documents showed, the Capitol Police ranked as “highly improbable” the probability of acts of civil disobedience and arrests arising from the “Stop the Steal” protest planned for the Capitol. The documents ranked that event and gatherings planned for Jan 6. by about 20 other</p>

organizers on a scale of “remote” to “nearly certain” in terms of the likelihood of major disruptions. All were rated as either “remote,” “highly improbable” or “improbable,” the documents show.

“No further information has been found to the exact actions planned by this group,” the Jan. 6 report says about about the “Stop the Steal” rally.

The Million MAGA March planned by Trump supporters is rated in the document as “improbable,” with officials saying it was “possible” that organizers could demonstrate at the Capitol complex, and that though there had been talk of counter-demonstrators, there are “no clear plans by those groups at this time.”

Another event by a group known as Prime Time Patriots was similarly described as having a “highly improbable” chance for disruption, with the report again stating that “no further information has been found to the exact actions planned by this group.”

Those optimistic forecasts are tough to square with separate intelligence assessments compiled by the Capitol Police in late December and early January. Those documents, also obtained by AP, warned that crowds could number in the thousands and include members of extremist groups like the Proud Boys.

A Jan. 3, 2021, memo, for instance, warned of a “significantly dangerous situation for law enforcement and the general public alike” because of the potential attendance of “white supremacists, militia members and others who actively promote violence.”

“Unlike previous post-election protests, the targets of the pro-Trump supporters are not necessarily the counter-protestors as they were previously, but rather Congress itself is the target on the 6th,” the report states.

Adding to the mixed intelligence portrait is a Jan. 5 bulletin prepared by the FBI’s Norfolk field office that warned of the potential for “war” at the Capitol. Capitol Police leaders have said they were unaware of that document at the time. FBI Director Chris Wray has said the report was disseminated through the FBI’s joint terrorism task force, discussed at a command post in Washington and posted on an internet portal available to other law enforcement agencies.

Capitol Police officials have repeatedly insisted that they had no specific or credible intelligence that any demonstration at the Capitol would result in a large-scale attack on the building. Despite scrutiny of intelligence shortcomings, Yogananda Pittman, the assistant chief in charge of intelligence at the time of the riot, remains in that position.

The current police chief, J. Thomas Manger, defended Pittman in a September interview with the AP, pointing to her decision when she was acting chief to implement recommendations made by the inspector general and to expand the department’s internal intelligence capabilities so officers wouldn’t need to rely so heavily on intelligence gathered by other law enforcement agencies.

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HEADLINE	01/08 Oso Fire Department burglary; stolen tools
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/oso-fire-department-looking-tools-after-burglary/H4OMZISBWBBM7L6TQX3GBNKATQ/
GIST	<p>SNOHOMISH COUNTY, Wash. — The Oso Fire Department is asking for the public’s help to watch out for some missing tools that are used in saving lives after an overnight burglary at Station 37.</p> <p>The station was broken into and a fire truck was ransacked, officials said.</p> <p>Firefighters said a pair of Jaws of Life extrication tools, a pair of Stihl chainsaws, a Stihl metal cutoff saw, a Honda generator, scene light, and several Makita 18v cordless power tools are missing.</p>

	Anyone who witnessed suspicious activity at the station or sees any of the missing tools is asked to call the Snohomish County Sheriff's Office.
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HEADLINE	01/08 Arrest: man w/explosive Oath Keepers rally
SOURCE	https://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2022/01/08/florida-man-arrested-explosive-oath-keepers-rally/2041641688867/
GIST	<p>Jan. 8 (UPI) -- A Florida man was arrested Thursday with a homemade explosive near a rally held by the Oath Keepers, police said Friday.</p> <p>Deputies with the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office spotted Garrett Smith, 22, running from the direction of the protest while carrying a backpack around 7:24 p.m. on January 6, the anniversary of the riot at the U.S. Capitol.</p> <p>About 85 members of the Oath Keepers were holding a rally in the parking lot of the Pinellas County Courthouse to support Jeremy Brown, a member of the far-right militaristic movement who was arrested for participating in the riot at the U.S. Capitol last year.</p> <p>Brown, 47, is currently being held without bond in the Pinellas County Jail on a U.S. Marshall's Service warrant stemming from the Capitol riot.</p> <p>After Smith's arrest, investigators found fireworks in his car -- which was parked near the protest. Investigators also searched Smith's home where they found more "pipe-type" explosive devices and "hand grenade-type" explosive devices, Sheriff Bob Gualtieri said during a press conference.</p> <p>Detectives said they are still working to determine why Smith had the explosives and how he planned to use them, officials said. It was not immediately clear if Smith has ties to the group.</p> <p>"We really have no idea as to what his political leanings are and whether he supported or opposed the protesters at the jail," Gualtieri said.</p> <p>Gualtieri noted that Smith has no criminal history and no social media accounts that investigators could find, describing him as a "sleeper."</p> <p>"Smith is what we call a sleeper, and these are the most concerning individuals because there are no opportunities to intervene and thwart their criminal activity before they actually act,' the sheriff said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 'Shopping cart' serial killer victims?
SOURCE	https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2022/01/08/shopping-cart-killer-victims-virginia-dc/9142475002/
GIST	<p>Police in Virginia have released the names of two women they suspect were killed by the alleged "shopping cart killer." and said they may have found a fifth victim in Washington, D.C.</p> <p>Fairfax County Police Chief Kevin Davis told reporters Friday during a press conference that DNA evidence was used to identify Cheyenne Brown, 29, of Washington, D.C., and Stephanie Harrison, 48, of Redding, California, as the victims found Dec. 15 near the Moon Inn Hotel in Alexandria, Virginia.</p> <p>The last person Brown was seen alive with was Anthony Eugene Robinson, Davis said.</p> <p>Robinson, 35, of Washington, D.C., is being held in the Rockingham-Harrisonburg Regional Jail in Harrisonburg, Virginia, on two counts of murder and two counts of felony disposal of human remains.</p> <p>He was arrested in November 2021 and charged with the killing of Allene Elizabeth Redmon, 54, and Tonita Lorice Smith, 39.</p>

Investigators believe the killer transported their bodies, [found by police in Harrisonburg, Virginia](#), in a shopping cart, Davis said.

"We believe he transported at least one of our Fairfax County victims in a shopping cart as well," he said.

Robinson is the "primary and singular suspect" in the deaths of the third and fourth victims, Brown and Harrison, and criminal charges are expected against him in those cases, Davis said.

A potential fifth victim was found dead this week in a shopping cart in Washington, D.C. after police received a tip, Fairfax County Police Major Ed O'Carroll said. Police did not release the name of the woman, who was found covered only with a blanket.

Robinson's potential involvement "is based on digital evidence that puts him in the same vicinity around the time of the victim's disappearance," O'Carroll said.

The Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Police Department is investigating that case.

Police tie Robinson to victims through dating apps

Police said Robinson used the dating app Plenty of Fish to lure victims. Cheyenne Brown had connected with him on that app, Davis said. Robinson also used the Tagged dating app, he said.

Investigators believe Robinson targeted his victims on dating sites and met them at motels in Virginia, [Davis told reporters last month](#).

"Our Shopping Cart Killer does unspeakable things with his victims," Davis said at the time.

The FBI Behavioral unit is working with Fairfax County police. Robinson had address from New York to Virginia and 35 different law enforcement agencies from New York to Harrisonburg, Virginia (about 130 miles south of Washington) have been looking at missing persons reports as part of the investigation.

"We need any survivor ... who may have interacted with (Robinson) and escaped to contact us," Davis said. "And we believe there are survivors out there."

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HEADLINE	01/08 Suspect Haiti president slaying arrested
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/suspect-in-assassination-of-haitian-president-is-detained-11641703317?mod=hp_lead_pos10
GIST	<p>Security forces in the Dominican Republic arrested a former Drug Enforcement Administration informant and convicted drug trafficker who is a key suspect in the assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse, senior Dominican and Haitian officials said Saturday.</p> <p>For months, Rodolphe Jaar had eluded Haitian police, who had issued a warrant for his arrest in the aftermath of the slaying of Mr. Moïse in his hillside home in Port-au-Prince on July 7.</p> <p>"He's been detained," said Roberto Alvarez, the foreign minister of the Dominican Republic. Mr. Jaar, a Haitian businessman, was apprehended in the Dominican Republic, which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti, on Friday, six months to the day of Mr. Moïse's death, authorities in both countries said.</p> <p>Haitian Justice Minister Berto Dorcé said Haiti was in talks with the Dominican Republic to have Mr. Jaar returned to Haiti. The Dominican Republic has no extradition treaty with Haiti, said Mr. Alvarez. The U.S. is also investigating since Haitian authorities allege that the assassination was partly planned and financed in Florida.</p>

“No decision has been taken,” said Mr. Alvarez, in reference as to whether Mr. Jaar could be sent to Haiti or to the U.S.

Mr. Jaar’s detention Friday follows [the arrest by U.S. law-enforcement officials](#) of Mario Antonio Palacios, a former Colombian soldier accused of having been one of nearly two dozen former servicemen from that country involved in the assassination. He appeared in a federal courtroom in Miami Tuesday, where he faces conspiracy to commit murder and other charges. He didn’t enter a plea.

Haitian authorities have arrested some 44 people who have been accused of participating in the plot to kill Mr. Moïse. None has been charged in Haiti. Those [arrested include 18 former Colombian soldiers](#), members of Mr. Moïse’s security detail, a former Haitian senator and a former worker for the Justice Ministry. The [motive for the killing](#), which has shaken Haiti, remains unclear.

A high-ranking Dominican official said that Mr. Jaar had been hiding in Haiti and recently entered the Dominican Republic, where he was immediately tailed by intelligence agents. The arrest was earlier reported by the Miami Herald.

The agents followed Mr. Jaar in the hope he would lead them to others who may have been involved in the killing, the senior official said. But they feared for Mr. Jaar’s safety and detained him.

“We had information that he could be killed,” the senior official said. “He is a key figure to understand what happened.”

The senior official said Mr. Jaar “has many enemies” in Haiti and feared for his life in the event that he is returned there. Mr. Jaar wasn’t available to comment, and it couldn’t be determined if he had a lawyer.

The senior official also said that it was too early to tell whether Mr. Jaar could be sent to the U.S. Dominican authorities would have to determine whether Mr. Jaar is wanted in the alleged crimes that took place in the U.S. related to the assassination, the official said.

The U.S. State Department didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment late Saturday.

A Haitian police report alleged that Mr. Jaar played a central role in the assassination plot, asserting he had been in charge of distributing the weapons, vehicles and equipment, such as bulletproof vests, used by the assailants in the attack on the presidential compound. According to witnesses interviewed in the police report, the team that attacked the compound left from Mr. Jaar’s house, which had been used to store weapons.

U.S. court records show that Mr. Jaar—who went by the name “Whiskey”—was an important drug trafficker in Haiti who helped to import at least seven tons of cocaine to the U.S. between 1998 and 2012.

After he was stopped in South Florida by U.S. law-enforcement officers in May 2000 for his alleged involvement in money laundering, Mr. Jaar worked for the DEA for the next 12 years as an informant, court documents show. In 2013, court records showed, he pleaded guilty in federal court in Miami to drug trafficking after he stole 50 kilograms of cocaine from a load he had helped DEA agents seize. He was released from prison in 2016 and deported to Haiti.

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HEADLINE	01/08 UN: Iran port key in weapons smuggling
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-navy-port-emerges-as-key-to-alleged-weapons-smuggling-to-yemen-u-n-report-says-11641651941?mod=hp_lead_pos4
GIST	Thousands of rocket launchers, machine guns, sniper rifles and other weapons seized in the Arabian Sea by the U.S. Navy in recent months likely originated from a single port in Iran, according to a confidential United Nations report that provides some of the most detailed evidence that Tehran is exporting arms to Yemen and elsewhere.

The draft report prepared by a U.N. Security Council panel of experts on Yemen said small wooden boats and overland transport were used in attempts to smuggle weapons made in Russia, China and Iran along routes to Yemen that the U.S. military has tried for years to shut down. The boats left from the Iranian port of Jask on the Sea of Oman, the U.N. report said, citing interviews with the boat's Yemeni crews and data from navigational instruments found on board.

Iran has openly supported the Houthis in their conflict in Yemen and abroad against targets in Saudi Arabia and the Red Sea, but has long denied providing the group with arms. Iran told the U.N. panel that its weapons weren't sold, transferred or exported to Yemen. A spokesman for Iran's mission at the U.N. said he couldn't comment immediately.

Once an obscure port that exported fruits and vegetables to Oman, Jask is a small port town in Iran's southeast that has grown in strategic significance in the past decade. In 2008, it started hosting a naval base, and an oil-export terminal opened there last year.

U.S. officials said Jask has been used as a departure point for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps for some time, but the U.N. report provides the first detailed evidence about specific arms shipments tied to the port.

The persistent ability of Yemen's Houthis to obtain smuggled weapons has helped give the group the [upper hand in a seven-year civil war](#), the report said, despite the intervention of Saudi Arabia and an Arab coalition that has used air power to pound rebel positions. The Houthis control Yemen's capital, San'a, and its major port, Hodeidah, and are closing in on the oil-rich city of Marib.

Nasr al-Din Amir, deputy chief of the Houthis ministry of information, said the U.N. panel of experts on Yemen wasn't neutral and called Iran smuggling weapons into the country "an illusion." He said an air and sea blockade didn't allow necessities into Yemen, "let alone the alleged weapons."

"Seaports and airports are shut, so how can these alleged weapons can reach us?" Mr. Amir said.

The U.N. panel's findings—part of a broader sanctions report on Yemen reviewed by The Wall Street Journal—provide a rare detailed view into Iran's alleged support for armed groups across the Middle East. The issue has loomed over talks in Vienna to revive an [international deal to limit Tehran's nuclear program](#), with Israel and some Persian Gulf states calling for more limits on Iran's support for militias.

The U.S. military has tried for years, with varying degrees of success, to [choke off the flow of weapons](#) heading to the Houthis. Deliveries of weapons to the Houthis is a violation of a U.N. arms embargo imposed on the rebel group since 2015.

The U.N. panel closely examined two shipments confiscated by the U.S. Navy in 2021 and one by Saudi Arabia in 2020, all of which the report said likely originated in Jask.

A small wooden vessel known as a dhow was intercepted south of Pakistan in the Arabian Sea by the U.S. Navy in May 2021 after leaving Jask, the report said. The boat contained 2,556 assault rifles, and 292 general-purpose machine guns and sniper rifles made in China around 2017, the report said, as well as another 164 machine guns and 194 rocket launchers consistent with those produced in Iran.

The ship also held telescopic sights made in Belarus. Minsk told the U.N. that the equipment was delivered to the Iranian armed forces between 2016 and 2018. The Belarus mission at the U.N. didn't respond to a request for comment. Other weapons seized had initially come from Russia and Bulgaria.

"The mix of the weapons indicates a common pattern of supply, likely from government stocks, involving dhows in the Arabian Sea, which transport weapons to Yemen and Somalia," the report said. It added that thermal weapon sights seized in June 2021 at a crossing between Oman and Yemen had also been manufactured by an Iranian-Chinese partnership.

The U.N. panel said it couldn't say whom the seized weapons were intended for, but the location of the seizures—which also include the Gulf of Aden and Pakistani and Somali waters—have been previously described by the U.S. as transit routes for Iranian deliveries to the Houthis.

In February 2021, a wooden boat loaded with weapons, manned by a Yemeni crew, was seized by the U.S. as it was about to transfer its cargo to another small vessel near Somalia, the U.N. report said. The vessel carried 3,752 assault rifles that likely came from Iran, based on their technical characteristics, along with hundreds of other weapons such as machine guns and rocket launchers, the report said.

Last month, the U.S. Navy said it seized 8,700 weapons in 2021, including 1,400 AK-47 assault rifles and 226,600 rounds of ammunition confiscated from a fishing boat with five Yemeni crewmen that America said came from Iran in December.

Ned Price, a State Department spokesman, said the December seizure was “another example of how malign Iranian activity is prolonging the war in Yemen,” where U.N. and U.S. efforts to broker a cease-fire have repeatedly failed. Mr. Price said smuggled weapons were helping the Houthis in their push to seize Marib, a strategic Yemeni city on the border with Saudi Arabia.

“Iran has developed a multitude of ways to deliver weapons to Yemen and has never stopped,” said a senior U.S. official. “Every time we make some new seizures, Iran finds a new way to move weapons.”

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HEADLINE	01/07 Convicted scientist recruited by China govt.
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/7/convicted-chinese-scientist-was-recruited-beijings/
GIST	<p>A Chinese scientist who pleaded guilty to U.S. economic espionage charges on Thursday was recruited by the Chinese government as part of a foreign spying program that recruited people with access to foreign trade secrets and technology sought by Beijing.</p> <p>Xiang Haitao, a former scientist with Monsanto, and permanent U.S. resident, was arrested in November 2019 upon returning to the United States after working in China and helping Beijing utilize a proprietary commercial U.S. technology system designed to increase farm output.</p> <p>After initially pleading not guilty to a federal indictment for economic spying, Xiang, 44, changed his plea to guilty in federal court in the Eastern District of Missouri in St. Louis. The plea agreement revealed Xiang was recruited by the Chinese Academy of Science, the Beijing government's science program, as part of a program called the Hundred Talents Program in 2016.</p> <p>The program, also sometimes known as the Thousand Talents Program, has produced scores of FBI investigations and prosecutions of more than a dozen Chinese nationals and Americans who U.S. investigators charge have been working secretly for China at American universities and research centers.</p> <p>The Trump administration in 2017 estimated in a report on Chinese economic “aggression” that Beijing has been stealing an estimated \$250 billion to \$600 billion annually in American technology and know-how.</p> <p>From 2008 to 2017, Xiang worked as an agricultural imagery specialist for a Missouri company called The Climate Corp., which was purchased by St. Louis-based Monsanto in 2013. In 2017, Xiang quit Monsanto and left the country with details of the company's Nutrient Optimizer, a proprietary predictive algorithm software designed to allow farmers to apply plant nutrients in optimal applications.</p> <p>The software merged weather data, soil information and farm management practices, allowing farmers to monitor fertilizer needs and future fertilizer applications.</p>

The plea agreement states that in mid-2015, Xiang reached out to the Chinese Academy of Science and its Nanjing Institute of Soil Science, which works on agricultural development.

In an email to the Nanjing Institute, he asked to be hired as part of the Hundred Talents Program, first launched in 1994 to recruit high-level talent.

“I have been the senior research fellow at US Monsanto Company since February 2008, mainly working on the research and application of large agricultural data, agricultural smart information system, agricultural spatio-temporal analysis models, crop phenotyping and monitoring, unmanned aerial vehicle agricultural remote sensing, hyperspectral remote sensing, agricultural sensor, etc,” Xiang stated in a 2016 email.

“Utilizing the relevant advantages afforded by the research, human capital and resources of [the institute], I plan to independently develop a smart digital agricultural fertilizer application management platform on the basis of big data,” he added.

The goal of the Chinese platform would be to employ the so-called Internet of Things, cloud computing, big data and intelligence analysis and information for soil nutrient management and precision fertilizer use.

“This platform will create a world-class precision fertilizer application solution, achieving rapid, low-cost popularization and promotion,” he said.

According to the plea, in February 2016, Xiang downloaded the Nutrient Optimizer from Monsanto’s computers to his work laptop and later placed it on a flash drive.

As he was leaving on a flight from Chicago to Shanghai on June 10, 2017, Customs and Border Protection agents searched his carry-on luggage and found an 86-page document on the Nutrient Optimizer. Xiang then proceeded to China and worked for the Hundred Talents Program, operating a laboratory at the Nanjing Institute.

He was arrested in 2019 upon his return to the United States and later indicted.

By putting the Nutrient Optimizer on a micro card and taking it back to China, “the defendant intended and knew that the trade secret would benefit the CAS, a foreign instrumentality, and the PRC, a foreign government,” the plea states.

Xiang’s LinkedIn page states that he worked at Monsanto as an advanced imagery scientist and had been educated at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the Nanjing Forestry University.

Sentencing is set for April. The maximum sentence for the single charge of conspiracy to commit economic espionage is 15 years in prison and a \$5 million fine.

“Despite Xiang’s agreements to protect Monsanto’s intellectual property and repeated training on his obligations to do so, Xiang has now admitted that he stole a trade secret from Monsanto, transferred it to a memory card and attempted to take it to the People’s Republic of China for the benefit of Chinese government,” said Matthew G. Olsen, assistant attorney general with Justice’s National Security Division. “With his guilty plea, Xiang is now being held accountable for this unlawful conduct.”

Said FBI Assistant Director for Counterintelligence Alan E. Kohler: “The American worker suffers when adversaries, like the government of China, steal technology to grow their economies.”

“It’s not just military technology developed in secret labs that adversaries want; in this case, it was agricultural technology used by American farmers to improve crop yields,” he added.

	<p>Xiang's lawyer, Vadim A. Glozman, said he plans to appeal a court motion to suppress certain information in the case.</p> <p>"Our intentions are to get Haitao back to his family as soon as possible and to appeal the denial of his motion to suppress," Mr. Glozman said. "During its investigating, the way in which the government was able to sidestep the protections of the Fourth Amendment, if upheld, would have far-reaching effects on everyone in this country. We look forward to litigating this issue on appeal."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 Conflict: NYPD chief, Manhattan prosecutor
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/08/nyregion/alvin-bragg-police-chief-eric-adams.html
GIST	<p>New York City's new police commissioner has expressed severe dissatisfaction with the policies of the new Manhattan district attorney, sending an email to all officers late on Friday that suggests a potential rupture between City Hall and the prosecutor over their approaches to public safety.</p> <p>The email from Police Commissioner Keechant Sewell said she was deeply troubled by policies outlined by Alvin Bragg, the district attorney, in a 10-page memo that Mr. Bragg sent to his staff on Monday. The memo instructed prosecutors to avoid seeking jail or prison time for all but the most serious crimes, and to cease charging a number of lower-level crimes.</p> <p>Commissioner Sewell, who, like Mr. Bragg, was just a week into her job, said in her email to about 36,000 members of the department that she had studied the policies and come away "very concerned about the implications to your safety as police officers, the safety of the public and justice for the victims."</p> <p>The email, which was first reported by WNBC-TV, suggests a looming conflict not just between them, but also between the new district attorney and the commissioner's boss, Mayor Eric Adams.</p> <p>The collision course between the mayor and the district attorney was sketched out during the Democratic primary in the spring of 2021. Mr. Adams made a crackdown on crime one of the main themes of his campaign; Mr. Bragg, following in the path carved by a handful of prosecutors in cities around the country, pledged to help reshape the legal system, to avoid disproportionate punishment for first-time offenders or those struggling with mental health issues or poverty.</p> <p>In a statement on Saturday, a spokesman for the district attorney's office said: "We share Commissioner Sewell's call for frank and productive discussions to reach common ground on our shared mission to deliver safety and justice for all and look forward to the opportunity to clear up some misunderstandings."</p> <p>"For our office, safety is paramount," the statement said. It added that contrary to the way that Commissioner Sewell and others had interpreted parts of the memo, the office intended to charge anyone who used guns to rob stores or who assaulted police officers with felonies. "All must be held accountable for their actions," it said.</p> <p>To some degree, the emerging tensions between the commissioner and Mr. Bragg reflect a broader political argument between centrist Democrats across the nation looking to soothe voters worried about crime and a movement of progressive prosecutors that has pushed for more lenient policies to make the justice system more fair and less biased.</p> <p>Some of those tensions are likely to play out in Albany this year in a debate over whether to scale back changes in a state bail law that went into effect two years ago, and that provoked strong reactions almost immediately.</p> <p>There is always an ingrained tension between the police and prosecutors that often centers on what charges to bring and, at times, whether there is sufficient evidence to make an arrest. For the police, in some measure, the job ends with handcuffs, while prosecutors are left with proving a case beyond a reasonable</p>

doubt or finding some other resolution. But such arguments do not often become public at all, let alone so early in a new administration.

Mr. Adams has been complimentary about Mr. Bragg when asked about him in recent interviews, calling him a “great prosecutor” and declining to criticize the memo. Asked about the commissioner’s email, the mayor’s office responded with a statement from Stefan Ringel, a senior adviser: “The mayor has deep respect for the district attorney and looks forward to working with him and the police commissioner to make sure the streets are safe, and to discussing any concerns directly.”

A police spokesman said the email “speaks for itself.”

Mr. Bragg and Mr. Adams, both Democrats, have significant histories in law enforcement, and both have pledged some measure of reform. Mr. Bragg, a former federal prosecutor, [stood out in a competitive primary](#) vowing to balance safety with justice. Mr. Adams, [a former police captain](#), has spoken out against police brutality and, while serving, pushed for changes within the department.

Mr. Bragg is [the first Black person to lead the district attorney’s office](#), Mr. Adams is [the second Black mayor](#) in the city’s history, and Commissioner Sewell is [the first woman and third Black person to lead the Police Department](#).

In his memo, Mr. Bragg instructed his prosecutors that unless they were required by law to do otherwise, they should ask judges for jail or prison time only for those who had committed serious offenses, including murder, sexual assault and major economic crimes. Others, he has said, would be directed to programs better equipped to deal with the issues that had led them to commit the crimes.

The new district attorney also instructed his prosecutors not to charge a number of misdemeanors. Many of the crimes on his list already were not being prosecuted by his predecessor, Cyrus R. Vance Jr. But Mr. Bragg directed his staff to avoid charging several misdemeanors which previously had been charged, including resisting arrest.

“These policy changes not only will, in and of themselves, make us safer; they also will free up prosecutorial resources to focus on violent crime,” Mr. Bragg said in his memo.

The directive on resisting arrest was among those that Commissioner Sewell expressed most concern about. She said that it would send a message to police officers and others that there was “an unwillingness to protect those who are carrying out their duties.”

“I strongly believe that this policy injects debate into decisions that would otherwise be uncontroversial, will invite violence against police officers and will have deleterious effects on our relationship with the communities we protect,” she wrote.

Mr. Bragg has also instructed his prosecutors not to seek jail time for gun possession without an accompanying charge. The commissioner strongly objected to that policy, saying that it “affords people the opportunity to continually possess guns without consequence,” and calling it the issue that most directly affected officers’ safety.

Commissioner Sewell’s email, sent at about 8:30 p.m. on the Friday of Mr. Adams’s first week in office, capped a whirlwind day for the city’s top criminal justice officials. Earlier in the day, the new mayor [announced a deputy mayor for public safety](#), Philip Banks III, only after Mr. Banks made the appointment public [in an opinion piece in The Daily News](#).

Mr. Banks had faced significant scrutiny given his history as [a subject of a federal corruption investigation](#) that resulted in prosecutors naming him as an unindicted co-conspirator. Also on Friday, Mr. Adams’s brother, Bernard Adams, was named as a deputy police commissioner. Bernard Adams retired as a sergeant for the New York Police Department in 2006, and he has more recently worked as an operations

manager and parking administrator at Virginia Commonwealth University, according to his LinkedIn profile.

It is unclear what Mayor Adams's role in the commissioner's memo might have been. Commissioner Sewell, an outsider to the N.Y.P.D. who had been the chief of detectives in the Nassau County Police Department, a far smaller agency, was his choice for police commissioner after a nationwide search, and she reports to him and to Mr. Banks. As mayor, Mr. Adams has the ability to dictate police policy and he has, throughout the campaign, maintained that he has every intention of using that power.

Commissioner Sewell's email dissected Mr. Bragg's policies at length and took issue with a number of them.

She expressed concern about his instruction that robberies of businesses be treated as misdemeanors if the offender does not create a genuine risk of physical harm, and with the downgrading of certain drug charges. She asked for clarification on several policies and said his policy of not prosecuting fare evasion — which Mr. Vance announced he would stop charging in most instances [more than four years ago](#) — was a potential issue.

Mr. Bragg's memo included an important caveat: He said that all such requests must adhere to the law. That will significantly dilute some of the most far-reaching effects of his new policies. New York law requires those who have been convicted of a felony in the past to be imprisoned if found guilty of a second such crime, and many of the worst offenses carry mandatory minimum sentences that Mr. Bragg's prosecutors will be compelled to heed.

Prosecutors around the country with policies similar to Mr. Bragg's have faced vocal opposition, particularly from police unions, and in the days after the rollout of the new district attorney's memo, several such unions objected strongly to his program.

On Saturday morning, Pat Lynch, the president of the Police Benevolent Association, said in a statement that the union supported the commissioner's positions. And the often combative union leader added that he was looking forward to working with her and Mr. Bragg.

But the letter from Commissioner Sewell suggested that Mr. Bragg would face significant headwinds as he tried to carry out the vision that he campaigned on. However, several of his peers in cities around the country — including Larry Krasner in Philadelphia and Kim Foxx in Chicago — cruised to re-election after facing similar opposition.

In [an interview on CNN on Friday morning](#), Mr. Bragg defended his policies. "This is what I was elected to do," he said.

The commissioner and Mr. Bragg were in contact this week, and Mr. Bragg hopes to meet soon, his spokesman said. Commissioner Sewell said in her email that she hoped "to try and reach more common ground."

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HEADLINE	01/07 Judge rules Crumbly parents 'flight risk'
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/crumbley-parents-drained-sons-bank-account-prosecutor-says-judge-denies-bond-reduction-request
GIST	<p>(FOX 2) - James and Jennifer Crumbley will remain held on a \$500,000 cash bond, an Oakland County judge ruled, on manslaughter charges connected to the Oxford High School after a judge ruled they were a flight risk.</p> <p>The Crumbleys are both still being held on a \$500,000 cash/surety bond after they were each charged with four counts of involuntary manslaughter days after their son was arrested for allegedly shooting several people at Oxford High School on Nov. 30. Four students died in the shooting and 7 others were seriously hurt.</p>

Their son, Ethan, was charged the day after the shooting and was in court earlier in the day Friday on his charges where [he waived his preliminary hearing](#) and will proceed straight to trial.

The judge in James and Jennifer's case rejected the argument presented by attorneys Mariell Lehman and Shannon Smith that the Crumbley parents had enough ties to the community that a reduced bond to \$100,000 would be enough to keep them in Michigan.

During Friday's bond hearing, the Oakland County Prosecutor's office unveiled several items that had previously not been revealed before, which included that the Crumbleys withdrew thousands of from several bank accounts, including Ethan Crumbley's.

Crumbley parents seek reduced bond

Smith and Lehman filed a motion in December [for a reduced bond](#) and said that, in response, the prosecution made a number of false and misleading statements connected to the case, including allegations of extramarital affairs.

Smith argued that this was done with intent to create a conflict between the parties and that the allegations did not fall under the scope of the search warrant that investigators had obtained. Additionally, Smith state that Ethan himself acknowledged that James hid the recently purchased 9MM, which she said proves that the gun was not freely accessible.

"Secondly your honor, in Ethan's journal which was provided in discovery, he explicitly states that he has to 'find where his dad hid the firearm.'" Smith said. "This statement, in Ethan Crumbley's own words, is contrary and false to the misleading assertions that have been made by the prosecution in this case. The assertion that the firearm was made freely to Ethan Crumbley."

She said this is contrary to misleading assertions made by the prosecution and that the Crumbleys should not be held responsible for their son's actions.

Lastly, she argued that the parents were unaware that Ethan was reportedly torturing animals, which allegedly including keeping a bird's head in his jar in his room for several months.

Prosecutor: Crumbleys went into hiding

Prosecutor Karen McDonald spoke next, detailing that the bond should remain at a half of a million dollars for each as she stated that both could leave the state. McDonald said James worked as a Doordash delivery driver and Jennifer had been terminated by her employer.

She also said that both of their families live in Florida and the only familiar tie southeast Michigan is their son, Ethan, and they started making plans immediately after the shooting.

"On Nov. 30, just hours after their son murdered children in a school, they started making plans." she said. McDonald said they stated making plans to sell horses and then bought four cell phones.

The day of the shooting, she said they also drained Ethan's bank account of \$3,000, leaving only \$0.99.

The next day, Dec. 1, they checked into a different hotel where more contacts were made discussing the sale of their horses and withdrew \$2,000 from their bank and then checked out of the hotel they were staying in, leaving one of their cars behind but parked so that the license plate could not be easily seen.

That's the day McDonald said [they drove to the art studio in Detroit](#) and never left except to smoke and to move the car so that the plate was not easily visible. While in the building, they texted with the owner that they needed provisions including socks and bedding items.

Meanwhile, their attorneys said that they believed the Crumbleys wouldn't have paid them if they had planned to run.

Cash, credit cards, burner phones

While inside the building, the doors were locked, even as police arrived and announced that they were there. They were found crouched behind a locked down where police took them into custody on Dec. 4. [When they were arrested](#), McDonald said they had Jennifer's social security card, more than a dozen credit and gift cards, cell phones, and \$6,600 in cash.

"Your honor, these are not the actions of individuals who wanted to turn themselves in. They had knowledge of the pending charges based on their text messages and what did they do? They didn't go across the street,. There was a police station across the street from their hotel. There was nothing preventing them from staying right there," McDonald said.

Prosecutor: Ethan Crumbley 'Gravely troubled' but parents didn't help

She then handed it over to assistant prosecutor Marc Keast, who declared the case to be a strong one and that the Crumbleys will be convicted.

"The evidence will show that Ethan Crumbley was gravely troubled. He was fascinated with firearms, he was violent, he displayed terrifying tendencies and behaviors, and he literally sketched out what he planned to do in his journal and his drawings."

Keast stated that Ethan 'gravely troubled' and had asked for help from his parents in the past, "As far back as March of 2021, he would text Jennifer that he thought there was a demon, ghost, or someone else inside the home," Keast said it would sometimes take hours for Jennifer to respond.

In May, Keast said Ethan was killing animals at their family home shot video of his acts. He also said that Ethan researched school shootings so much, he got spam ads regarding his mental health. Keast said he was also fascinated with Nazi propaganda and had even purchased a Nazi coin on Amazon.

While repeatedly telling his parents he was hallucinating and demonstrated a passion for only one thing - guns - Keast said his parents did not intervene or seek help. In August of 2021, he sent a video to his "only friend", Keast says, that showed him holding James' gun and saying "it's time to shoot up the school jk jk jk."

On Nov. 26, James bought the gun with Ethan by his side as a Christmas gift, Keast said, but they failed to secure it and even gave inconsistent statements about how secure it was, all while Keast said he was planning his actions.

Between that Friday and Nov. 30, Ethan recorded videos of what he was planning to do and stopped doing school work, Keast said. He was reportedly surprised that his parents didn't notice or care.

On Monday, Nov. 29, he was caught by teachers researching ammunition in class. The school called Jennifer and left a message. Instead of calling them back, Keast said she texted Ethan and ended it by saying "don't get caught".

The next day was the day of the shootings. That's when teachers found drawings that Ethan allegedly made and called in the Crumbley parents for a meeting. Keast said they refused to take Ethan out of school and also refused to ensure that the 9MM was secured in their home, which Keast said was 'just down the road' from the school'.

Keast said Jennifer's employer would have 'gladly' given her the day off and she didn't have any meetings scheduled that day. He also said that James could have done his Doordash job with his son.

As the meeting wrapped up, Keast said Jennifer ended by asking 'are we done here?' to which the counselor gave them 48 hours to seek help or Child Protective Services would be called.

They left at 10:45 a.m. The shooting started around 1 p.m.

HEADLINE	01/07 Ahmaud Arbery killers sentenced to life
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/three-men-found-guilty-of-killing-ahmaud-arbery-each-sentenced-to-life-in-prison-11641587103?mod=lead_feature_below_a_pos1
GIST	<p>A Georgia judge sentenced three men to life in prison Friday for the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, whom the men confronted and killed while he was running in their neighborhood in early 2020.</p> <p>Travis McMichael chased Mr. Arbery with his father Gregory McMichael and William “Roddie” Bryan Jr. in two pickup trucks on Feb. 23, 2020. Travis McMichael shot Mr. Arbery three times with a 12-gauge shotgun, killing him.</p> <p>A jury in Brunswick, Ga., convicted the men on Nov. 24 of multiple murder charges each. Travis McMichael is 35 years old, Gregory McMichael is 66 and Mr. Bryan is 52.</p> <p>The McMichaels each received a life sentence without possibility of parole. Mr. Bryan was sentenced to life with the chance of parole.</p> <p>Mr. Arbery “was killed because individuals in this courtroom took the law into their own hands,” said State Superior Court Judge Timothy Walmsley as he pronounced the sentences. “Taking the law into your own hands is a dangerous endeavor.”</p> <p>The three men, wearing masks because of the Covid-19 pandemic, showed no emotion as they were sentenced. None spoke at a hearing before the sentencing.</p> <p>Mr. Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man, was unarmed when he was confronted by the McMichaels in Satilla Shores, a predominantly white residential area outside Brunswick, Ga.</p> <p>Prosecutors argued that Mr. Arbery, who was living a few miles away, was out for a run that day and that the defendants, who are white, hunted him down based on unfounded suspicions that he was a neighborhood thief.</p> <p>On Friday, at the hearing, Prosecutor Linda Dunikoski asked the court for the McMichaels to receive life in prison without the possibility of parole and asked for Mr. Bryan to receive life in prison with a possibility of parole.</p> <p>Family members of Mr. Arbery asked the court to impose life in prison without the possibility of parole for all three men.</p> <p>“The man who killed my son has sat in this courtroom every single day next to his father,” Marcus Arbery, the victim’s father, told the court before sentencing. “I’ll never get that chance to sit next to my son ever again.”</p> <p>At trial, defense attorneys argued that the men had good reasons to suspect Mr. Arbery was responsible for burglaries and thefts and they sought to detain him for police.</p> <p>On Friday, before sentencing, lawyers for the defendants argued that the judge should grant the men the possibility of parole because of their good works in the community for years before the shooting, and because the lawyers said the men didn’t intend to kill Mr. Arbery.</p> <p>Mr. Arbery’s death drew national attention after a video showing the fatal shooting circulated, with many Black civil-rights groups and leaders calling it an example of racist vigilantism. The Rev. Jesse Jackson and the Rev. Al Sharpton both attended the trial in support of the Arbery family. The case put laws authorizing citizen’s arrests under scrutiny and led to the passage of a hate-crime law in Georgia.</p>

	<p>The three men also face a coming federal trial. The U.S. Justice Department has charged the men with violating Mr. Arbery’s right to use a public street because of his race and attempted kidnapping in connection with the killing. The Justice Department has also charged the McMichaels, who were both armed during the incident, with use of a firearm during a crime of violence.</p> <p>The defendants have pleaded not guilty.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/07 Racist 1890 law blocks Blacks from voting
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/08/us-1890-law-black-americans-voting
GIST	<p>The Mississippi officials met in the heat of summer with a singular goal in mind: stopping Black people from voting.</p> <p>“We came here to exclude the Negro,” said the convention’s president. “Nothing short of this will answer.”</p> <p>This conclave took place in 1890. But remarkably, approximately 130 years later, the laws they came up with are still blocking nearly 16% of Mississippi’s Black voting-age population from casting a ballot.</p> <p>The US stands alone as one of the few advanced countries that allow people convicted of felonies to be blocked from voting after they leave prison. The policy in Mississippi underscores how these laws, rooted in the explicit racism of the Jim Crow south, continue to have discriminatory consequences today.</p> <p>One of those affected is Roy Harness, a 67-year-old social worker, who may never be able to vote because of a crime committed decades ago.</p> <p>In the mid-1980s, he was convicted of forgery after he ran up a debt to a drug dealer and cashed a series of fake checks. He spent nearly two years in prison and hasn’t been back since.</p> <p>In recent years, Harness, who is also an army veteran, has been on a new path. He enrolled in college when he was 55 and got his bachelor’s degree when he was 63. He got a master’s degree in 2019. Now a full-time social worker, Harness keeps a shelf behind his desk filled with awards and accomplishments – a reminder to his clients of all they can accomplish.</p> <p>In 2013, he tried to register during a voter registration drive at his college, but saw on a pamphlet that forgery, the crime he had been convicted of decades earlier, was a disenfranchising crime in Mississippi.</p> <p>“It makes me feel bad. I’ve served my country, nation ... got a degree and [I] still can’t vote, no matter what you do to prove yourself,” he said.</p> <p>Mississippi also makes it nearly impossible for anyone convicted of a felony to get their voting rights back. Fewer than 200 people have succeeded in restoring their voting rights in the last quarter-century, the Guardian can reveal, based on newly obtained data.</p> <p>Now, Harness is involved in a new effort to change Mississippi’s law.</p> <p>After slavery ended in Mississippi, following the US civil war, newly enfranchised Black voters in the state were beginning to wield political power. In 1870, Mississippi sent Hiram Revels to the US Senate, the first Black person to serve in the body.</p> <p>By 1890, the delegates who gathered for a constitutional convention in Jackson, the state capital, were determined to blunt this trend.</p> <p>They faced a significant roadblock to their racist goal. The new 15th amendment to the US constitution explicitly prohibited states from preventing people from voting based on their race. And so the delegates</p>

came up with a plan that would effectively prevent Black people from voting without explicitly saying that was their intent.

The delegates enacted a poll tax and literacy tests, measures that would become widespread across the south, as a way of keeping people from voting. But they also enacted a provision that disqualified people convicted of specific felonies from voting. The crimes they picked were those they believed, based on prejudices, Black people were more likely to commit. Bribery, burglary, theft, arson, bigamy and embezzlement were among the crimes that would cause someone to lose their voting rights. Robbery and murder were not.

Mississippi continues to see the legacy of its efforts to shut Black voters out of the political process today. It has one of the [highest concentrations](#) of Black people in the country, yet has not elected a Black person to [statewide office](#) in well over a century. It was [among the states](#) with the lowest voter turnout in the US in 2020.

Even though Black Mississippians comprise about one-third of eligible voters in the state, they account for more than half of the [235,152 people](#) who can't vote in the state because of a felony conviction, according to an estimate by the Sentencing Project, a criminal justice non-profit. Overall, more than one in 10 citizens of voting age can't cast a ballot in Mississippi because of a felony conviction – the highest rate of disenfranchisement in the US.

And it is astonishingly difficult for those affected to get their right to vote restored.

To vote again, people with disqualifying felonies in Mississippi must first convince a lawmaker to introduce a bill in the legislature on their behalf to restore their voting rights. In other words, they need their own, individualized piece of law.

The bill must then pass both chambers of the legislature by two-thirds vote and be approved by the governor. Mississippi is the only state in the country where people convicted of felonies need to go through the legislature to get their voting rights back, said Christopher Uggen, a professor at the University of Minnesota who studies felon disenfranchisement.

The only other path to get one's voting rights back is a gubernatorial pardon, which hasn't been granted in Mississippi in nearly a decade.

The process is the same one the delegates spelled out during the 1890 racist constitutional convention, where the felony disqualification rule was created. It was included as a safeguard to ensure that well-connected white Mississippians who committed one of the disenfranchising crimes had a way of gaining their voting rights back.

Mississippi does not keep track of how many people successfully get their voting rights restored each year. But [data](#) compiled by Blake Feldman, a criminal justice researcher in Mississippi, shows it's almost no one. Feldman began tallying the data in 2018 for the Southern Poverty Law Center, and has continued to track it since.

Since 1997, an average of about seven people have been successful each year. In the 2021 legislative session, just two people made it through the process.

There are no posted instructions anywhere online, said Hannah Williams, a research and policy analyst at MS Votes, a non-profit that works to expand voter access. Applicants must submit a paper form – there is no online option – to their lawmaker and convince them to vouch for them. After that, their fate is in the hands of lawmakers, who can reject an application for any reason.

“There really isn't a way to guarantee anything because the process doesn't really make sense. There's no information. You can't go to a website. And to be honest, you can't even call the capitol to get information, because they don't really know what the process is,” she said.

“Unless you know somebody that knows somebody that knows somebody who has their ear to the floor, you don’t know when you have to turn these applications in,” she added.

Nick Bain, a Republican who chairs the Mississippi House judiciary committee, which oversees the bills for rights restoration, acknowledged the process was “convoluted”. Both chambers can set whatever criteria they want people to meet before they restore someone’s voting rights. Those criteria, which are not posted publicly, do not have to agree.

“I do believe it’s patently unfair the way that we do the process. And maybe as a Republican, that may not be the Republican thinking on that,” he said. “We have a problem with consistency. The process, it’s by no means perfect. By no means is it efficient ... But right now it’s the only process that we have.”

While the law today continues to disproportionately affect African Americans, white Mississippians are affected too. Dennis Hopkins, a 46-year-old maintenance supervisor from Potts Camp, Mississippi, was convicted of grand larceny as a teenager in the 1990s, released from prison in 2001, and hasn’t been able to vote since. Because he was convicted of a felony when he was a teenager, he’s never been able to vote in his life.

Even though he has raised nine children (he’s adopted several), become a local fire chief, and coached many school sports teams with hundreds of kids, he can’t vote.

“I’m thinking ‘you sentenced me to four years in prison and you’re giving me a life sentence,’” he said. “I feel like I’m a branded man and I’m not equal to everybody else.”

Harness and Hopkins are now the lead plaintiffs in two separate high-stakes federal lawsuits challenging Mississippi’s felon disenfranchisement laws.

One [suit](#) argues that the list of original disqualifying crimes unconstitutionally targeted Black people and therefore should be struck down. The second, filed by the Southern Poverty Law Center [in 2018](#), also challenges the Mississippi policy and takes aim at the arcane restoration process.

“The process is fundamentally arbitrary and inherently susceptible to discrimination,” lawyers wrote. “There is no oversight of any kind to ensure that legislators do not exercise their discretion to vote against a proposed suffrage bill on the basis of an individual’s race, religion, or political leanings.”

Even though the core of Mississippi’s policy remains what was drafted during the 1890 convention, lawyers for the state have argued its discriminatory taint has been removed. There have been small tweaks to the law; voters chose to remove burglary disenfranchising crime in 1950 and added murder and rape in 1968.

In February, the US court of appeals for the 5th circuit [upheld Mississippi’s policy](#), writing that 20th-century tweaks to the law removed the discrimination written into it in 1890. But the court later agreed to [rehear](#) the case, and there were oral arguments in September. A decision is expected in the coming months.

In late October, both Harness and Hopkins traveled to the state capitol and appeared before a panel of lawmakers. They were there for a hearing convened by Bain, who wanted to explore new ways to fix the process for getting voting rights back.

At the end of the hearing, one of the lawmakers approached Hopkins and offered to file a rights restoration bill on his behalf. Hopkins was unaware the process was even a possibility – he had been told there was no way for him to get his voting rights back. Still, he refused.

“That’s not gonna help everyone else. I told them no – I’d prefer not to do that,” he said.

	“I tell my kids how important the vote is ... it shames me to tell them I can’t vote and here is why,” he said. “I know there’s a lot of people who say, “my vote doesn’t count. Well I beg to differ. It does count.”
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